

ACT OF DESTRUCTION

Sloan's private paradise, they called it—the primeval African valley and the mighty gorge that led to it, which had remained wild, beautiful and unchanged since the dawn of time. Sloan was a Game Warden, a law unto himself; he had a rapport with the land and its animals which most of the men who knew him did not understand, and which sprang from the very roots of existence, demanding a kind of freedom which made impossible any compromise with the values of encroaching civilisation.

With Sloan into this wilderness went a group of widely disparate men. The purpose of their expedition was to hunt poachers, the result, disaster—a disaster caused largely by Sloan's fatal purity of purpose. The consequent destruction to Sloan's peace of mind was symbolized and exacerbated by a greater act of destruction, the submerging of the gorge and the valley in the waters of an immense power-and-irrigation-scheme. Sloan's only remedy was to fight, and he fought like an animal—savagely, but never without reason. Instinctively, he challenged the loss of his paradise and, with it, the destruction of something priceless in man himself.

The tension mounts to the very end of the book; Sloan's battles have an epic quality, as befits the subject. For Ronald Hardy's theme is nothing less than the impact of civilization on the wild places of the earth and of man's own nature, and he depicts humanity at its lowest depths and its rarest heights. *Act of Destruction* is a story on the grand scale, and deserves to be judged by the highest standards.

Also by Ronald Hardy

THE PLACE OF JACKALS

A NAME LIKE HEROD

KAMPONG

THE MEN FROM THE BUSH

Act of Destruction

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*This is for Joyce,
Christopher and Christine*

Part 1

THE BIVOUAC

I

SLOAN HAD BROUGHT THE trucks to the shade trees, arranging them so that they formed an angle to the bivouac. The light would die soon, Pitt saw; already the plain grew a patina of bronze and there were purple clefts in the hills that he had not seen before. It was the good time of day; the smell of wood-smoke and of earth giving up its heat, the peppery scent of tent canvas that reminded him of sail-cloth on an open boat; voices flat on heat-thinned air. They had come through thornbush savanna to south of Staedtler's Gorge, to the marshes where he could see wind in the heads of papyrus. He relaxed in the shade, staring upward through intricacies of branch and leaf.

'You tired?' Maclaren's voice asked.

Pitt flushed. 'No.'

'Then you can brew up.'

'What about Arhumani?' Pitt pointed to the game-scout.

'Ever taste his tea?'

'No.'

Maclaren smiled. 'You'll find a pressure-lamp and all the stuff you'll need by the ammo in the back of the truck.' Pitt watched the fingers twisting the radiator cap, the release of steam; the mouth shaped words behind its wreaths: 'And brew it hot and strong.'

Pitt went to the truck. He had no confidence in his hands and he began to unload with exaggerated care. One of the china cups fell to the ground and he retrieved it, wiped it free of soil. He felt his cheeks burn.

'Clumsy,' Vanrennan said. The voice was severe.

Pitt said nothing.

Vanrennan touched the radio transmitter. 'Could you really mend this if something went wrong?'

'I guess so.'

'With hands like that, I mean.'

Pitt stared at him. Vanrennan's pale eyes were expressionless, the mouth pursed in disapproval. There was some inner stress, Pitt thought; something that precluded humour or kindness. 'I'll mend it if I have to,' he said irritably. He wished Sloan would return. He could hear the small explosions of fired kindling behind him.

Athumani had begun to cut wood in the thicket and the snick-snick from the blows of the machet rebounded in flat echoes from the breast of the hills. He stroked the metal of the truck. It was still hot, bright from the infiltration of sunlight through the thorn. He upset the folding-table, re-aligned it on the uneven ground.

'You the clumsiest man I ever saw,' Vanrennan said. He decided to stack the rifles. They would be ready then for cleaning and oiling. He brought them from the trucks, feeling the weight of each of them in his hands. He could sense at once the subtle balance between stock and barrel, a communication of latent power that seemed to bring warmth and enlivenment to him. He built them in a careful pyramid, cunningly interlocked at the apex. He warned: 'Don't you knock them guns over.'

Pitt smiled.

'I'm serious, boy.'

Maclaren came over. 'You seen Ellis?'

'He went with Jeru,' Pitt said.

'For water?'

'Yes.'

Maclaren nodded. He had a thick pompadour of red hair, so springy that it trembled with every movement of the head. The sun, oblique and sullen now, had caught its crown so that it seemed to flame. Pitt felt unease. There was a reckless quality in Maclaren, some wayward light that came and went in the eyes. The arms were alive with sinew, ridged with dark-blue veins that seemed to pulse and swell with the wild sap of the man. Maclaren stepped back into shadow and the flame of red extinguished; he crossed to where Haggard stood stiffly against the second truck.

'Police,' Vanrennan said in disgust. 'What we want with police?'

Pitt shrugged.

'I tell you, you need an army to stop poaching.'

'Yes.'

'Harry Sloan won't stop it——'

Pitt began to boil water.

'—Nor a hundred like him.' Vanrennan lighted a cigarette. He had not proffered the package. 'How old are you, boy?'

'Nineteen.'

'Nineteen.' Vanrennan repeated it: 'Nineteen.' He spoke the word slowly and regretfully, holding it in his mouth as if it were a sweetmeat that he was reluctant to lose. 'Nineteen . . .' He stared into the tip of the cigarette.

Pitt coloured. This envy of youth embarrassed him.

'I can give you forty years. That seem old to you?'

'Pretty old.'

Vanrennan fingered the stubble that sprouted in the crevices of his face. Then he untied his bedroll, kicked it out, began to smooth it. It was old and patched, smelling of tobacco and rifle-oil. There was a taint of mildew. 'You see that?' he said. He touched a stain drawn like a green rose, beat at it with his hand. 'That's what you get out here. And you can get it on a gun. You take my tip, boy. You clean that gun every night.' He continued to squat by the bedroll, the brown-specked hands lying on its surface. Pitt could see that it had associations for him, this decrepit thing that had borne his body in desert and highland, in swamp and forest and savanna. Vanrennan looked up suddenly and the face enlivened. 'I've counted stars in a few strange places, I can tell you . . .' Then the animation left him and Pitt wondered if it had ever existed. Vanrennan muttered: 'That kettle's near boiling.'

Pitt bent over it. Haggard was still standing by the truck, erect and unrelaxed. He seemed alone; not by choice but from something that set him apart, denied him contact with his fellows. He was pale and prim with sparse hair and fastidious lips that enunciated every word with care and clarity. He stood there in this mould of apartness from which he could not release himself.

Maclaren asked: 'Where will you doss, Mr Haggard?'

'Doss?'

'Sleep. Ground or tent?'

Haggard considered. 'I think I'd like the tent.'

'He thinks he'd like the tent,' Vanrennan said softly.

Haggard said: 'I'd also like a word with you, Maclaren.'

'Sure.'

'If we could move over there . . .'

Pitt watched them go to the tail of the truck.

'Why's he have to be so bloody formal?' Vanrennan asked. 'Or ain't it fit for our ears?'

Haggard's voice came distinctly: 'There's something I want to clarify, Maclaren.'

'Yes.'

'I'll come to the point. It concerns Sloan and myself.'

'Sloan?'

'Yes. As you know, I am one of a number of police officers seconded to the Game Department for special duties. I can't claim to be familiar with this kind of assignment; but my orders are flexible enough—to render whatever assistance I can to the anti-

poaching teams in the field.' The voice stopped. They could not see Haggard, hearing only the stilted phrases, the pauses and little modulations of tone: there was an illusion that he read from a book. '... Presumably the Wardens are concerned with law enforcement. There is also the question of liaison with the Police Air Wing. All this is reasonably clear . . .'

'Couldn't we talk later?' Maclaren asked. 'I've got a camp to set up and Sloan'll be back soon—'

'We'll talk about it now,' the thin voice said. 'This is as good a time as any and one can't very well speak to Sloan—'

'Why not?'

'It's something one wouldn't care to discuss with him. It's a matter of relationship—*our* relationship . . .'

'You and Sloan?'

'Yes.'

'Well, what about it?'

'Nothing's *defined*, Maclaren. That's why I'm speaking to you instead of Sloan. Who's in charge? Who gives orders? Who makes decisions?'

'That worries you?'

'It *could* be important.'

'You don't know Sloan, do you?'

'No.'

Maclaren laughed. 'I never heard anyone give Harry Sloan orders.'

'That's absurd.'

'In a way. But Sloan's a peculiar bloke. He makes his own rules.' Maclaren came from behind the Land Rover and Haggard followed. 'Why don't you unbend a bit, Inspector? We live pretty rough on these trips. Just rub along with Sloan and you'll be okay.'

'Where is Sloan now?'

'Recce.'

'But the light's going.'

'Sure. But by now he'll have scouted the head of the gorge. And at night you can see a fire on the plain for twenty miles.' The hair was a red aureole again and Maclaren pushed it from his temples. 'You made that char, son?'

'Yes,' Pitt said. 'Hot and strong.' Haggard was alone again, not even stooping to the flame of the brush fire.

THE DEFILE NARROWED INTO walls of stone. Everything was sapless, the acacia bone-white and the shale of the bed grey with dust. Sloan felt thin slivers of iron-stone shift and break under his boots. There was no water in the wadi and yellow gorse lay desperate in the fissures. He could reach out, follow with his fingers the runs of coloured strata, the walls enclosing and the light seeming to flow like liquid down the bed. Higher, the stone lost shape and colour in the depth of thickets. He had removed his shirt, facing into the faint wind so that it dried his chest and brought coolness to his throat. He walked free, without rifle, pack or bottle; untrammelled except for the weight of the binoculars, the strap stuck with sweat to his neck and the metal swinging in wet arcs on his skin.

He paused by the thickets, looking back down the wadi. The strata ran in perfect lines of orange rust. He could see where the stone crust had split at birth to form the defile, the strata on either wall in exact height and correspondence. This perception was natural to him. He stood there, lost in the sense of the beginning of things, this communion with a remote yet living past. It came as a sudden hunger, always like that, the fabric of time parting like a curtain to reveal an origin. It clutched him in a pain of recognition. He wanted to hold it, fuse his own identity with that which had gone; those same patterns of light, sky and saffron stone in which men and beasts had moved on an antique land.

Beyond the thickets, beyond the webs of spiders and the spears of grass bleached white on the fringe of shadow he could see the glare where the defile ended. He moved through shade and out into the burn of the fading day. The wind came again, bringing with it acrid smells of rock and sand, the tang of moisture that presaged rain. He breathed deeply of it, this primal air which had flared the nostrils of the game herds, turned them and brought them in their great migrations to the lake. They would be there now, he knew; dark-red with distance, breaking the veils of heat and haze and moving in their infinite arrangements into definition. He felt the response within him and he began to climb; out and upward across the stone outcrops that curved in ribs to the shoulder of the hill.

There was wind, too, on the rock face, bringing him the scents of the plain, breaths of decay from cleft and fissure. He had looped his bush-shirt in the strop of the binoculars and he climbed quickly

and without respite, concentrated now on the physical pleasure of the ascent; a deep and recognisable savour that grew on the acceptance of hazard, the sense of space beneath him.

He raised himself to the ledge.

The plain seemed boundless. It stretched from the papyrus marsh to the limit of vision. It spread in tawny folds and undulations. Waterless now, it was like the sandvelds of the south; immense pans of ochre taking motion from the waves of heat. 'A great seething batter-cake of a plain,' his father had described it. But it was more than that, Sloan thought. With the rains, the pigments would stain outward from the sedge, olive then green and brown with fertility and the land opening into succulence until even the thorn seemed alight with flower. He walked along the lip. The rock was like a brand on the flesh of his fingers.

Then he saw them.

The savanna to the east was dark with game. They were distant, so distant that they seemed fixed in immobility, the endless columns drawn on their immemorial path to where the river reflected in the sky. They came in their thousands and the scene had the quality of an old print, its colour heightened by the low red sun; complete and perfect in its composition. He stared at it; this wild pilgrimage which never failed to move him. 'Beautiful,' he said aloud. 'Beautiful.' He focused the binoculars and the formations crossed the lenses in a slow and vivid tableau of hide and hump, the heads swung low and each beast seeming to propel a pool of shadow. He watched until the glasses hung heavy on his wrists, until the streams of bay, sorrel and chestnut coalesced in a ripe and flowing blur.

He sat down on the ledge. Something in this river of migrant life always reached out for him, bringing him to the mouth of the gorge when the game moved away from the lake; and again when the rains approached and the herds had turned. He had become a part of their cycle, coming alone to the gorge, always alone, because he could not share it with others. It touched him in strange places of the emotions, so raw that he was afraid to reveal them. It was this first sight of the migrant herds that disturbed him. Time dissolved and they were there as they had always been; obeying some elemental voice which he could hear distantly within himself. They: always he thought of them like that—a great and single entirety of game in the mass.

But the game was only part of it; a portion of a larger inheritance which few would accept. Behind him was Staedtler's Gorge, the rift of high basaltic wall through which the river would soon pass in

tumult to the flood-plain; and, beyond, mountains scarred by lava; and the river itself bisecting the valley where wild life teemed in great concentrations. And, further, wastes of land abandoned to the fly. All this was theirs to preserve, held in trust by natural tenure. He felt the weight of responsibility, the fear that underlay it. Change and decay, the passing of everything—was that really a law? In the gorge there were places where a man could part the debris of shale and stone and find an axe-head; caverns where deer crossed the walls in faded patterns of ochre and where the voice came back out of the throat of darkness like a protest from the past; regions of solitude and silence where beauty was another name for pain.

Later, he heard the call of a night-plover and he watched the herds lose feature until there were only the faint unbroken cords of their procession, dark on the plain then gone into blackness. He waited and a yellow stud of fire grew and diminished and grew again somewhere in the texture of night. He marked its bearing.

3

WITH DARKNESS THEY WERE drawn to the fire. They sat within its radiation, flesh alight in the interplay of flame and shadow. The wind had veered and it came now from the gorge, bearing with it the coldness of water and the sound of cataracts. The sound seemed to change, grown on the night, first sibilant, then deepening into menace. They heard it as an accompaniment to their thoughts and voices. Pitt could not dismiss it; it was like a wall of black water falling within the mind. Vanrennan was speaking and the quiet voice came as if from a distance . . . 'We'd settled in the Mau because of the soil. My Daddy loved good soil. I was only a kid—perhaps six, seven—but I can see him now digging his fingers into the earth, letting it sift into the wind. It was brown and rich, like putting your hands into a barrel of ground coffee, and a pleasure to work. You could grow anything and we thought our ship come home I tell you when we get this land. But we reckon without East Coast fever . . .' Vanrennan laid his rifle across his knees, extracted an oil-bottle and a pull-through from the stock.

'What happened?' Ellis asked.

'Well, my Daddy won't stick to crops—he puts his money in

cattle. The native cows don't give much of a yield so he buys pedigree stuff—Shorthorn bulls and heifers. And we build ourselves quite a herd. Milk, butter-fat, cheese. We must have been one of the first dairy farms and we sell our stuff as far as Mombasa . . . ' He felt in the pocket of his shirt for a scrap of rag, stroked it carefully for grit. Then he oiled it, threaded it on the pull-through. 'But what we don't know is that this rich soil is stiff with ticks—and these same ticks bring East Coast fever. It goes through our stock until there's nothing left but burning carcasses and the stink of charring hide in our noses from dawn to sundown . . . ' Vanrennan grimaced. 'I can smell it now. And my poor Daddy shrivelling like a dead berry from the bitterness of it . . . ' He touched Pitt's knee. 'This come from game, boy. You remember that. Game brings ticks and ticks bring disease . . . ' He began to clean the barrel with long, rhythmic pulls. 'Anyways, we go down to Nakuru where the grass is fat and green—good cattle country you'd say. But it weren't no damn good. The stock wasted and later—when it's too late—they tell us there's no iron in the land and even the Masai won't touch it. So we move on again and this time it's sheep. Even that weren't simple—nothing is in this bloody country. We want sheep from the Masai but they not interested in cash. The price is twenty sheep per cow—so we have to send down to the Germans for cattle, bring 'em up and then exchange them. That way we get our flocks. And it in't long before half on 'em take foot-rot and the other half choke to the neck with worm . . . ' He tapped Pitt's knee again. 'And that's another thing game bring. Worms. I reckon it's the game that did for us. The game look pretty—nothing prettier. But you ask my Daddy. He tell you all about game. He tell you all right.'

'That's bad,' Ellis said uneasily. 'Bad.' His fear was never far below the surface. Vanrennan's story had touched it like a probe, exposed it. He looked behind him into the darkness; a strange, instinctive gesture that characterised him. Somewhere in that wild and throbbing land were the forces that would destroy him. He knew it with certainty. They were there: legions of microbe and parasite, elements of such power and ferocity that it was futile to resist. He was a rotund man in middle age and he had brought his urban mind and a small capital to the Territory at the end of the war. He farmed on the fringe of the Miremba Reserve, waiting for catastrophe with his pale and greying wife. He asked Vanrennan: 'Did he—recover from this?' Behind the question was the plea for reassurance.

'This is a good country,' Vanrennan said. The fingers were stroking sensuously at the walnut stock of the rifle. 'But you got to take it on its own terms. You got dangers, sure. Bush fire, game, pestilence, drought. The lot. But you also got sun and water, rich soils, fertility. The land's wild enough to knock you flat. But she'll raise you again—if you'll let her.'

Ellis listened. It was true. But a man needed special qualities to ride that kind of pendulum; from calamity to ease, anguish to peace. He shook his head. I can't live like that, he told himself; not like that. He looked behind him to where the night surged like a sea in dark and violent pressures.

'You should've been a bank clerk,' Vanrennan said maliciously. 'Clean white hands, good pension, nice smooth passage . . .'

'And why not?' Ellis asked. 'Why not?' His voice trembled. He felt Maclaren's hands on his shoulders, the rub of fabric against his neck. The hands seemed to linger and he wanted to reach upward, hold them and draw strength. Then the Scot encircled the fire, draping a blanket across each man's back. He did this carefully, as if their comfort was important to him. Only Haggard resented the intimacy of the act. The pale face flickered with distaste. He said: 'Where is Sloan? Surely by now . . .?' The voice was an intrusion and they were silent, hearing, then, the wind in papyrus, the lisp of crickets.

'He'll be along,' Maclaren said. 'Then we'll eat.'

'I could brew up again,' Pitt said.

'Yes. You do that, son.'

'Out there in the dark . . .' Haggard said with disapproval.

'Well, now, Inspector,' Vanrennan said. 'I guess Mr Sloan is able to cope. And he'll be in no great hurry to bring himself away.'

'Why not?'

Vanrennan smiled. 'You might say Sloan has a personal interest in Staedtler's Gorge. A very personal interest.. ' He pointed into the blackness. 'You got some real rough country out there. That river run down four hundred miles from the Falls and there in't nothing but hills and bush and river-forest all the way—great belts of land that in't never been touched except by Suru tribes. Beyond the gorge the land falls into a great valley stuffed with game like a hunter's dream. There are no motorable roads—just a few tracks that bog over most of the year—so the tourists seldom get there on account they like to do the game areas by car. This side the river you have the Reserve, the other side a controlled area. All this is Sloan's territory, you might say. But it's more than a job to him,

much more. And Sloan's more than a bloke with a Government gun——'

'Sloan is a Deputy Game Warden,' Haggard corrected. 'That and that alone. And he'd do well to remember it.' The thin hands caught at the stuff of the blanket, gathering it to his throat in a quick, womanish gesture. 'One thought those days were gone—game officers lording it over vast areas like little tyrants . . . ' the voice rose into the accents of temper . . . 'flouting authority, bending the law——'

'Nothing little about Sloan,' Vanrennan said. 'But I give you this much—there something driving that man. He take it all so personal.'

'A peculiar breed,' Haggard said with irony. 'A wild and bloody youth spent in blowing the head off every living beast within rifle-shot. Then the transition, the classic transition from hunter to fanatical game preserver.' The voice took disdain. 'I don't get it.'

'And I don't get you neither,' Vanrennan said sourly. 'What you doing here, anyway? You don't give a damn about the game.'

Haggard stared. 'No. But I *do* care about the law.'

'We'll start the food,' Vanrennan said to Jeru. 'Get another fire going.'

Pitt watched the ranger move from the arc of firelight, the face integrate with shadow. The moon had not yet risen.

'Of course,' Ellis said in his anxious voice, 'it's nice to have the game. It gives the country distinction. But it all comes down to economic development.' He lighted a cigarette on a brand from the fire. 'I can't see the government abandoning thousands of acres of fertile land to the needs of wild animals. Not indefinitely, that is.' The face irradiated in the glow of the brand.

'Yes,' Vanrennan said. 'But you got to have farmers to work it. *Real* farmers.'

'*Real* farmers?' Ellis asked. 'What do you mean?'

'Nothing.'

'Yes, you do. You mean me.'

Vanrennan shrugged.

'You mean I'm not a real farmer.'

'I didn't say that.'

'No. But that's what you mean.'

'If the cap fits, mate . . .'

Ellis felt the tension enter him. He could not control the tremor in his hands and he was conscious of the cigarette shuddering slightly where his blanket parted. He said unsteadily: 'Mrs Ellis and I work very hard. Very hard indeed. We've had our setbacks

and we'll have many more; but, God willing, we'll overcome them . . .' He sensed the pressure of the wilderness again. God seemed remote, less real than the pale grey shapes that might, even now, be leaning their enormous weight against his fences. He forced the image from his mind, sucked nervously at the cigarette. Why should God be on *his* side? The game were there first. Was the Almighty really impressed by land-leases, covenants and boundaries? The shapes returned, swelling like apparitions into grey and ponderous agencies of destruction. He said, with relief: 'At least we haven't had that yet.'

'What?'

'Elephant.' He wanted to confide, transfer this burden of anxiety. 'Do you know, buck can leap a four-foot fence quite easily? And zebra . . . well, zebra seem to go through anything.' God! how he hated zebra; those numberless hooves pounding the land into erosion, legions of hungry, animated rocking-horses—

'You could always put up notices,' Vanrennan said.

'NOTICES.'

'Warning 'ein off.'

'That's not funny.'

'You're too damn near the Reserve, mate.'

Maclaren said: 'Fence can be electrified.'

'Costs money. And in any case I'd need higher fence.'

'In my Daddy's day,' Vanrennan said, 'we had nothing like that—a man protect his crops and stock as best he can. And before that, under the old game laws, a settler couldn't kill no more than four antelope a month.'

'You didn't tell me what happened,' Ellis said.

'Happened?'

Ellis hesitated. Then: 'To your—Daddy,' he said. The diminutive seemed absurd.

Maclaren laughed.

Ellis rose. 'I'll take a stretch,' he said. He had become suddenly isolate. Unanswered questions left gaps in the mind. He stared down at Vanrennan's grey, crudely-chopped hair. Men like Vanrennan give nothing away, he decided; not even the recipe for failure. 'Damn your father,' he said deliberately. 'Damn his eyes.'

'Sit down, Bob,' Maclaren said. Ellis felt the weight of the hands on his shoulders again. He allowed himself to be pressed back into the canvas chair. He heard the Scot's voice behind him, warm with affection: 'You just ignore that old buzzard . . .' The steam from the kettle broke against his knees. He watched Pitt fill the pot, the

face bent toward the fire so that it flushed with heat. 'Army, isn't it?' he asked.

'That's right.'

'Leave?'

'Yes.'

'Commission?'

Pitt continued to stir the pot. He did not look up, knowing that Ellis's eyes were fixed with intensity upon him. He felt the man's insecurity, the desire for communication. He said: 'That's very nearly a rude question.'

'It wasn't meant to be.'

'You talk too much, mate,' Vanrennan said. 'What the hell's it to you if the boy's commissioned?'

'I'm sorry—'

'So long as he looks after this here radio . . .'

'I said I'm sorry—'

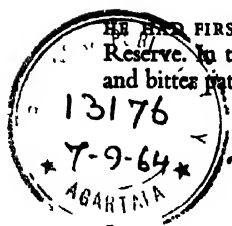
'He can be a bloody general for all I care—'

'Not quite that,' Pitt said. 'Just a one-pipper.'

'This continual bickering . . .' Haggard said severely.

'Let's drop it,' Maclaren suggested. 'He's a lieutenant and he's a nice boy and he's come to help us with the RT and the navigation. And he's given up part of his leave to do it.' He inhaled the fragrance of Athumani's cooking-fire. 'That grub smells good.'

'I'll pour the char,' Pitt said. He began to splash canned milk into the mugs, staring above their rims into the depth of the fire; searching, as he had searched as a child, for the patterns of faces in its red, palpitating heart. He could see the spikes of acacia sharp even in disintegration, the bark of logs speckled where the flames had not reached. The wind came and smoke broke in acrid webs against his eyes and he turned and in that moment he saw shadow leap and a shape move from the edge of darkness to the orange earth where the fires cast their distant light. 'There's someone there,' he said.



touch. Then the patches dissolved like black frost under the rising sun and colour came, pale lemon on the straw shacks and the light sharpening the huts and stores and vehicles into focus. He had watched the morning-glory under the eaves of the Warden's bungalow turn blue as if pigment had run suddenly in its vines. Then Sloan walked from the flank of the petrol dump, standing there erect in his faded shirt and corduroy shorts and they had sensed his strength; his domination. The head turned in slow, critical survey, the beard seeming to twist like flax in the ripe light. The Africans were aligned in double-column in the centre of the compound and Pitt saw them alert into awareness. 'The front row are senior rangers,' Maclaren murmured. 'Those behind are motor drivers and messengers . . .' Beds of zinnias bordered the asphalt and suddenly the light was clear and brittle and he could count the blooms, the metal buttons on the rangers' tunics. He heard Vanrennan's laconic voice say: 'Like the Brigade o' Guards . . .' Sloan paced on rope-soled boots before the lines. He wore no socks and the calves swelled dark from sun above the boots. He moved with grace, taking the gun from each man in his deft and sober manner. Vanrennan said: 'I like a man that's serious about artillery.' Sloan worked the mechanisms, held the rifling carefully against the light. He was taller than any of them; the skin, hair and beard tawny in those lines of purple flesh. Craven, the Chief Warden, came to the veranda of the bungalow, the face wan with sickness and the body taut across his stick as if compressed against some inner pain. He had brought the night with him, a hint of vigil, and they had stared at this frail image of authority. Then Sloan smiled at him and the Warden lifted his stick in salute and Pitt saw the haze of day rise behind the boles of thorn.

Now, motionless on the corrugated earth, Sloan stood watching them. The binoculars hung black on the midriff, the bush-shirt trailing from the wrist. In those tremors of firelight he was statuesque, the chest red and vibrant and the head, neck and beard set in a natural symmetry. He had beauty; a proud and lissome beauty that derived from, found harmony with, the land that had produced him. Pitt sensed this; he had come like a projection of the land, a visitant drawn to the glow of the bivouac and bearing with him the smells, sounds and mysteries of the water-singing night. Without word or movement Sloan generated power. Pitt felt the beginning of excitement. He dropped the can. 'Clumsy boy,' Vanrennan said. 'Clumsy.'

SLOAN HAD COME FROM the papyrus creeks, the ground sodden, then sun-hardened and ridged against his soles. He had walked slowly, orientated by the bivouac fires which burned yellow rents in the enfolding dark. The veld was silent and he heard only the cataracts, the sound of wind in blackthorn. It was a land of fires; little refuges of light and warmth which men built against the reach of night. Sometimes a solitary fire burned in an unbearable aura of isolation; sometimes the fires lay like coals strewn across an immense circumference. Men were drawn to them as if to a lure and, crouching, took the shapes of ancient fears. He stood where the dark dissolved, reluctant to discard it. They had not seen him. They sat in silhouette about the fires, the hands and faces black then lurid, pulsing in radiance, then black again. He would cross the clearing and share with them the smells of food, heat and the taste of wood-smoke in the throat; the gorge and the sweet air of the savanna gone from his perceptions.

He watched them. There had been many camps; dead embers to break under the beat of sun and rain and mark his passing like forgotten cairns. The wilderness healed the scars and there was a feeling of ephemerality as if the men and their missions had never been. But always, at night, these tableaux of flame and smoke and half-seen shapes had the power to arrest him. They lived in the caprice of curling wind and the faces came and went as if in the light of turning lanterns.

He crossed and Pitt offered tea.

'Thanks.'

'Or there's beer.'

'Tea'll do fine.'

He drank it standing. Then: 'The game's on the move,' he told them.

'I've never seen the migrations,' Pitt said softly. The voice held the timbre of youth and Sloan stared down at him. The back was slight, the neck furrowed like a girl's where the hair ended, the cheek smooth and round against the firelight. He's young, Sloan thought; young, still with the capacity for wonder. He said: 'You're the Army boy, aren't you?'

'That's right.'

'From Mababe?'

'Yes. But I've had a leave on Naivissa.'

'Wild fowl?'

'Yes.'

Sloan had moved to where the scouts worked at the mess-tins. He bent and Pitt heard him say: 'I need a pail of sand.'

'Castles?' Maclaren asked.

Sloan smiled. 'Nettle.' He turned and Pitt saw the rash ridged in angry weals across the chest.

'There's a lot of that stuff down there,' Maclaren said seriously. 'Groves of it.' He fingered the weal. 'You better strip off, Harry.'

Pitt watched them.

'It's really buffalo-bean,' Ellis explained. 'It grows in long vines and it explodes masses of poisonous filaments into the air when you knock it. Stings like hell.' He studied Pitt's face for reaction. There was pleasure in the imparting of knowledge. 'Buffalo-bean,' he repeated importantly.

'I once knew a man in the Rift got his chips like that,' Vanrennan said

'Died?' Ellis said.

'Died.'

'From a nettle?'

'Yep.'

'Don't talk wet.'

'I ain't talking wet at all. This man happen to take a deep breath when he brush against it and he gets a mouthful of these stinging hairs you mention. The throat swelled so tight he couldn't breathe.'

Ellis felt the unease again. It was never far, never wholly absent. It lived somewhere in the bowels and it inflated like a bladder at the slightest stimulus and he could not suppress it. Each day there was this futile struggle against its possession. 'I suppose that *could* happen,' he conceded.

'I'm telling you,' Vanrennan said.

The face shifted into firelight and Ellis thought he saw the glint of malice in the eyes but he could not be sure; he said to Pitt: 'Of course, this is a kind of game we play . . .' the voice was not quite controlled . . . 'the simpleton and the old sweat, the new boy and the pioneer . . . all very amusing . . . and you'd think a man couldn't survive in Africa without a pint or two of trashy Dutch blood in his veins. But you mustn't take them at their face value. These Boers or Afrikaners or whatever the hell they call themselves are all the same . . . all the same . . . all decked out in the same old fake and boring image . . .' he paused, searching for some barb with which to wound

and hurt, some weakness in Vanrennan which he could lacerate into pain . . . 'the lean, craggy face and the blue marksman's eye and the dialectical tricks and the rifle-oil rubbed into the hair for brillianthine and the idiotic gun-talk . . .' he smiled into Pitt's puzzled face . . . 'Don't let him fool you, lad. He's no Dead-Eye Dick and he speaks English as well as you and me and I doubt his Daddy ever saw an ox-wagon in his life . . .' He wiped the spittle from the corners of his mouth. The liquid sounds of the night obtruded, the faint rasp of bull-frogs from the creeks. They were silent and he knew he had not reached Vanrennan, that he knew nothing of the man; not of his strength nor of his weakness.

Vanrennan said drily: 'You a very eloquent bloke.'

Haggard listened. Here, on the edge of wilderness, he felt his personal isolation. In Port of Kuru detachment had seemed an asset. He had stood aloof, a point of calm above the turbulence of those urgent rivers of vice, passion and cupidity that pulled like an undertow at the life of the city; never involved except in a strict professional sense. And the squalor had not rubbed off on him as it had on some. But here it was different. The warmth had gone and he could not immediately rekindle it, join in the baiting and the camp-fire quips, verse himself suddenly in this lore of crop, game and forest.

'Moon's up,' Pitt said.

It had been a mistake to come, Haggard decided. It wasn't orthodox police work and an officer ought not to place himself at a disadvantage—the first tenet one learned at the Police Training School. Proceed from experience and knowledge; the foundations of authority. Authority. It was strange how that word recurred within his mind; like a phrase of music one could never dismiss. It was something he wanted, he supposed, something he lacked and which he resented in other men. Of course, it was conferred by a uniform and a badge of rank: but that was merely superficial. Remove them and one exposed the old painful diffidence. He turned his head to where Sloan stood naked between the fires, the arms outstretched above the head and the pubic hair bushed dark on the groins. Maclaren had begun to knead river-sand into the flesh, abrading it in gentle circular movements of the hands so that the filaments of the buffalo-bean should be dislodged. Sloan said: 'Me togs are full of it. We'll have to wash those too.' Haggard thought: I couldn't do that, stand there without a stitch, another man's fingers . . . He felt himself recoil at the prospect of such intimacy. It seemed to intensify his growing sense of isolation and he pulled the blanket to his throat and across his knees. He watched Maclaren

invert a pail above Sloan's head, the big body stream with water and the mouth part from the sensuous pleasure of it. He turned away, hearing their voices join in laughter, the laughter loud and unrestrained as if a zest for living had suddenly expressed itself. A mistake, he repeated to himself. The Police and the Game Departments don't mix—there are fundamental differences. These people care nothing for law, merely use it to perpetuate violent and ruthless rhythms of life. In Port of Kuru there had been a vague overlapping of functions; the searching of dhows in the harbour for illicit horn and ivory, security duties at the trophy sales and at the transit sheds where there were never less than ten thousand pounds' weight of Congo ivory, the tedium of the fly-spotted court where offenders against the Game ordinances were tried. But that was all. He heard Sloan's deep laughter again. Apart from the two black rangers Sloan was the only real professional, it seemed. Pitt was on the fag-end of an Army leave; and Vanrennan, Ellis and Maclaren were farmers from the settled areas. He said to Vanrennan: 'Will you tell me something.'

'Sure.'

'Why do you come on these trips?'

'Ain't that obvious?'

'Not really.'

'You mean—personal reasons?'

'Yes.'

Vanrennan considered. 'Well, I'll tell you. On the face of it you might say I'm a lot short of one hundred per cent for game. I'm a cash crop farmer and I have a living to earn and I don't much care to have my land tramped or my fences bust or my plants chewed. There are times when I have a bellyful of drought and locust and lousy markets and at them times it don't please me to suffer what *you* would call—' he smiled sardonically—the depredations of wild animals. It don't please me at all. But, and it's a big but, I ain't one hundred per cent of a farmer, either. I'm also a roamer and a hermit and a hunter. That means I need space.' He emphasised it. 'Space. And so long we keep the game we got to give it the space to live in. Once it goes a whole lot of other things go too.' He spat with contempt into the fire. 'For all what this here Bobby Ellis say I seen a lot of this country. I seen what happen in half a century and I don't like it. I seen the Indos move in and the graft run like a poison stream from the Lake clean across to Port of Kuru. I seen the missions dig the tribal code out of these poor bloody niggers and give 'em nothing in return but a psalm and a pair of calico drawers.

I even seen the Masai bucks counting toes at desks in Government schools. I seen what *you* would call progress and civilisation spread like blight across the last paradise left on this here earth and I don't want no more changes. Does that answer your question, Mr Haggard?

'In a way. But you can't stop change.'

'We can try.'

Sloan came to the fire. 'I'm glad you said that, Ren.' The beard glistened with water and he took it between his thumb and fingers and compressed it to a point. 'We must keep what we inherit.' He touched Haggard's shoulder, keeping the hand there and feeling beneath it the thin sharp bone. 'You haven't told us your name, Mr Haggard.'

'Name?'

'Your first name.'

Haggard leaned forward, causing the hand to fall.

Sloan said kindly: 'We'll be together for some time, you know.'

Haggard said nothing. There had been a moment when he had wanted to respond, when he had felt the warmth of some intensely masculine quality in Sloan. He stared at Sloan in confusion and the familiar instinct for rebuff arose within him. He said: 'Haggard is my name. Inspector Haggard.'

Sloan shrugged. 'As you wish.'

Why did I do that? Haggard asked himself; now I am remote from them again; an intruder. Sloan turned his back and he felt the weight of his aloneness and he wanted to reach out from this sheath of isolation and say: 'Tom. Tom's my name . . .' But it was too late. Sloan had gone from him and he heard the resonant voice ask Pitt: 'Game birds you said?'

'Yes.'

'You had a licence?'

Pitt smiled.

'I'm quite serious. I don't joke about these things. We've had a lot of trouble with the Army.'

'Ah, come off it, guv'nor,' Maclaren said. 'He's only a boy. He's been out shooting—just for the hell of it.'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'Just for the hell of it.' The phrase was familiar. He had heard it on innumerable occasions and always it had the same dead ring. It came glibly to the tongues of those who could not resist the quick unpremeditated shot, to whom the movement of living fauna seemed a perpetual affront and to whom the taste of

power had grown palatable—this illusory power that came with the detonation and the kicking bodies and the things that fell split-winged from trajectories of grace. It was like some kind of flippant epitaph to a million beasts, birds and reptiles, he thought: you could inscribe it on the rock-faces high above the emptying plains and valleys—‘Shot up—just for the hell of it . . .’

Vanrennan said to Pitt: ‘You take some pals with you on this lake party?’

‘Yes.’

‘Army boys?’

‘One of ’em.’

‘They’ve shot up the game,’ Sloan said. ‘Now they’ll start on the birds. And when the birds have gone maybe they’ll shoot each other.’

Maclaren laughed loudly.

‘I envy you, Johnny,’ Vanrennan said. ‘Always good for a belly laugh.’

‘What party was this?’ Ellis asked, with curiosity.

‘You ain’t been listening. You still thinking about food, mate.’

Haggard sat unmoving. The voices seemed to recede, never to engage him. It was like some scene which he watched from a distance and in which he could play no part. There was distrust there, he thought; an inevitable distrust. Once a copper, always a copper, they’d probably express it. And yet they hadn’t deliberately excluded him; he’d done that himself. I don’t need these people, he assured himself, without conviction. He stared into the fire, pushed with his boot at the debris of half-burned kindling.

‘There’s no secret about it,’ Pitt said. ‘There were four of us. Me, a bloke called Lulu and two nurses.’

‘A bloke called Lulu?’

Pitt smiled. ‘Well, that’s what we call him. Kalulu is his name. Lieutenant Kalulu.’

‘An African—commissioned?’

‘Yes.’

‘And two nurses?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nice party.’

‘A nice party,’ Pitt agreed. He watched Athumani ladle food into the mess-tins and his mouth began to salivate.

HARRY SLOAN WAS THE first to arise. This was his habit in camp, something he tried to achieve; holding those first minutes of breaking day in solitary possession, the aftermath of night still raw in the nostrils and the light advancing swiftly in opalescent flights across the plains and ridges. These were the moments when the earth itself seemed to enliven, when the hills shook off palls of shadow and a quality of ineffable innocence lay briefly on all the land. Later, yellow patterns of heat and brittle light would impose themselves and the land would be old again and they would move with effort on its iron corrugations.

For Sloan each day began with beauty, promise and true renewal; each day complete like a small and separate experience. He had always known this sense of regeneration and it had grown in counterpoint to the lives of the wild creatures within his charge. He understood them, these creatures, not only with the mind but with instinct. The day would be lived and there would be clear water, red food or the sap of plant or tree, thirst to slake and hunger to appease, sanctuary to seek; and the living thereof would be a consummation. This was the cycle and each beast moved within it. He too was involved, sometimes deeply but never completely; reaching always for a simplicity of living which could never be total and which his heritage denied him. There had been a time when he had lived in bush, alone and for a month, when it had seemed that he had achieved this rhythm; had stood dangerously near like a man against a moving wheel, smelling its wind and then, suddenly, had been drawn into it. It had come like a state of grace and for a period he had run, breathed and hunted like the first man alone in the beginning in an unpeopled world; not an interloper but of it. He had no clear remembrance of this period, knowing only that he must have crossed some frontier of the being, crossed it because he had wanted it passionately and wholly. If he had entered and had being in an alien world at that time nothing now remained but a few transient and sunlit images that touched the mind in little cameos of unease. There was something there, he knew: buried—like an old guilt that could not be expressed. He could not understand this guilt, unless it lay in his deliberate rejection; or perhaps in that panting golden world of the senses he had come too near to that which was forbidden. He had tried but he could not remember—only the awaken-

ing. It had been like that, an abrupt shift from one plane to another; he had come like a sleepwalker into a sudden awareness of his situation. There had been a bank of sand and long shadows in the shapes of spears and a wash of yellow sun and he had looked up the high column of a borassus palm, up to where the fronds arched and the big ripe berries hung in orange clusters. He had stood, half crouching, his arm encircling the trunk, and he had stared down the bank and into the underbrush and he was in the grip of insupportable fear, so strong that he was incapable of movement. But nothing moved and the fear left him and he knew later that it was a human fear which had reclaimed him. He was naked and he had no hunger and his belly was full and hard; congealed blood rimmed his fingernails. What had happened to him? What had he eaten? The questions still came and the guilt slept there, never wholly quiescent.

Sloan watched the light break across the sleeping figures, rose-coloured as if distilled from the essence of the red earth of Mirembe. It was this colour of richness and fertility, those red soils of plain and plateau, which gave the lands of Mirembe their distinction. The colour, lost in pelts of scrub and vegetation, yet seemed to produce itself; in the barks and foliage of trees, in the flush of sandstone and in the veins of iron in the rocks, in the leaves of poinsettias and the flowers of flamboyants, in strange reflections which hung like the glows of fires in wastes of heat-paled sky. Even the green-and-brown basalt of Staedtler's Gorge seemed to smoulder from a hidden redness and when the river ran under dawns and sunsets the walls of the ravine were pricked with crimson light. It was a red country; not only the colour of fertility but of force and vitality, of fury and violent end.

He decided to take his towel down to the creeks. This also was his habit; to wash alone and to begin his day in silence. He was a quiet man, bred from infancy to lands so immense that a quality of soundlessness lay thereon like another dimension. He had absorbed this quality, had learned instinctively that sound had meaning, was there to be interpreted. But this land of silences could produce great clamour; from tempest and river, wind, rain and cataract. He hated noise. Noise concealed the sounds of stealth. Noise disarmed. Noise was a component of vulnerability.

He left the bivouac, walking slowly and studying the sandy earth around the shade-trees. The ground was well-trodden, impressed with the diamonds of tyre-treads where the Land Rovers had manoeuvred for position. But, farther, he found the tracks of

scavengers ringing the camp then moving inward to the scents of man and food. There was pleasure in this, a sense of affinity with the wild things which had come to examine, assess—and then pass by. He could see the tracks; wide circles distant with caution, the approach and the brief three-legged pauses which told their story of wariness and unhurried stealth. He stopped once, looking back from where the ground fell away to marsh and he saw the light strengthen and the tribal patterns of the blankets enrich suddenly in red and yellow ochre and Athumani move from out his blanket and the face lift to the new day.

He washed in a pool by the creeks, standing knee-deep in its coldness and hearing behind him the rustle of papyrus and the sound of wingbeat in the gorge—that dead slapping sound of wing on air and metallic echo which conveyed the sense of motion within soaring height, the feel of precipices. Then, refreshed, he sat on a boulder and stared across the skein of streams. There were two seasons of rain in each year and, soon, the streams would join and lose identity and the Suswa would throb like a tide into the flood-plain. Now, he could see where the streams ended, losing impetus and congealed from the dust of wadis. Beyond that was bush savanna, solitary acacia standing in this vastness like miniatures, mist shot with quivering red-brown light and, on the horizon, the antelope migrations linked like a necklace across the curvature of the plain.

He lit his pipe.

These were the truly indolent moments of the day. He liked to smoke and feel the warmth of rock or sand against his nakedness, to breathe deeply of morning air which had not been devitalised by heat. Even the hour before sleep had no real serenity; the fading day pushed its narrative of events into the mind and they were hot with immediacy and sleep came from a chaos of images and clamant voices. But this was a beginning, a new and separate day; and if there were reflections they came in tranquillity.

Those early years seemed distant now. There had been a child and a timber house and the smells of coffee and grain and cattle dung and a brook which gave sweet water, thick pale hair which fell across his face at dusk. It was this memory of hair which persisted and which was almost his only recollection of her. It came accompanied by the scent of some herb like lavender and when he thought of her it was as a darkening of the light when she bent across him and that breathless moment when the hair and the lavender-smell engulfed him. He had passed from childhood when

she died. The house was silent and his father lived in a well of misery and for a time they opened drawers and bags and closets and the scent of lavender rose in elusive breaths and they could not contain their pain. Then the scent disappeared, not even faintly present in the dust of drawers or the fabric of her clothes, not even in the lace handkerchiefs which she had brought from England and which, in secret, he sniffed at desperately; he knew then that she had really gone.

Outside was the wilderness. The tea companies had not yet moved downward from Womolo and they lived in isolation. They could look from the veranda across the brook to a land which rose from the valley in giant staircases of rock and bush to lose feature in distant cloud. This wilderness hemmed them and he knew now that his mother must have found it oppressive. There were no settlers within forty miles of their own plantations and she had sewn and mended and laundered clothes in the pale brown water of the brook and baked food in a charcoal oven and, at sundown, had sat tiredly in a rattan chair on the veranda to watch the night flood the valley. After dark she had kept accounts; searching, he supposed, for some sign of the profit which never came. He had seen one of these early account-books and the folios were covered in a thick backward-sloping hand, full of deletions and alterations and little despairing footnotes like 'looks like a loss' or 'another bad month'. But it was the hair he remembered: he had no lock or tress of it and it was a memento existing only in the mind and if she came to him at all it was not in the sepia photographs or the bundled letters or the cameo-brooch but in the feel and scent of hair; he was a child again in that resinous room of crooked timbers and the window flowered with purple jacaranda.

After her death they left the valley. It had been pretty, he remembered, its floor thick with leleshwa bushes which turned silver in the evening light; but the railway moved near and the tea companies built brick bungalows for the blacks and, soon, the losses grew to an insupportable burden. They crossed the border and down into the northern province of the Territory. The altitude was high, the soil good; and there were Government grants.

This, too, was wilderness. The settled lands were small areas of cultivation cast like chequers across a vastness of rising leys. To the north lay mountains and, from November to April, cloud broke on the ridges and there were heavy rainfalls to slake the soil. His father, Malcom Sloan, had become taciturn and they lived a bleak, womanless existence in a house which he had built in a replica of

the first. He had taken refuge in physical work, this bitter lonely man; there were wells to sink and crops to tend, bush to clear and roads to beat out of the animal tracks which spread from the farms like the veins of leaves. Indeed, this was the image that remained of him—a silent figure which seemed only to return in postures of relentless toil; crossing the mind in ovals of axe-swinging light and leaving its effluvia of soil and wood and sweat-damp hair as if the man had passed close by, invisibly. But he was a poor builder. He had no clear conception of plumbs and levels and tools seemed not to fit his hands and the house and sheds and outhouses worried the eye with their imperfect lines.

There was no community. Sometimes the families of settlers met by arrangement in self-conscious gatherings and there were smells of brillantine and mothballs, desultory talk of crops and markets and rinderpest, the exchange of newspapers. But that was all. The sense of exile brought not unity but division. They saw no value in association and, soon, the Indian immigrants grasped to themselves those lines of commerce which had run so loosely from the province to the coast.

Malcolm Sloan moved on. He despised the Asians and he had no deep interest in the mechanics of profit. Work was a soporific, an element of the waking hours which he employed to flail his body into exhausted sleep. He was, at that time, a big sharp-boned man with a wild, malarial face and a beard which he scissored savagely into uncomely sprouts. He was steeped in hostility and when he spoke of his wife it was in coarse and contemptuous terms as if, by despoiling it, her memory could be erased.

The boy Harry knew nothing of this. He was a boy with a boy's mind and his father's pain was beyond his understanding. There were tears; but memory had blurred and he could not even restore her face except in soft textures of skin and hair which were common to any woman: the tears had a quality of luxury with no real relation to the past. There was a need to eat and a need to sleep—and a need to weep. Only the present had reality; outside him was this vibrant African life of sun and colour, the living of it so intense that the dead had no place. He was ten when they left the northern province and he was illiterate.

He remembered that later morning. They had brought the waggons through a moonscape of dead volcanic cones and he had stared upward at denuded necks and felt their chill of shadow and the wheels had rasped in tuffs of powdered ash which had fallen from the cones and then, suddenly, the plateau of Mirembe lay

beneath them. It was like a bowl of warm red light and his father reined the team and they heard only the whirr of insects and the rustle of wind in the long yellow scarves of prickly mimosa. He had seen emotion—yearning perhaps—enliven his father's face and the tongue lick the parted lips as if this vision of fertility was something to be drunk or tasted. Then Malcolm Sloan said: 'She'd have liked this, Harry,' and the face had relapsed again into the contours of bitterness and they had moved down into the plateau.

They claimed their land and built their house. This was the third; he could not now recall that feverish period of labour in the sun, extricate its details from the memories of earlier homes. But the house had risen; they walked again on familiar planes of unevenness and there, once more, were the ragged timbers and the crooked jambs and lintels, the offending angles and the verticals which the eye measured uncasily against other perpendiculars.

The land was not high enough for arabica and the soil, rich and volcanic, too good for sisal. 'In any case I wouldn't touch it,' Malcolm Sloan said contemptuously. 'The labour don't like cutting their pretty black hands on the leaves.' The soil was friable with a fine red grain to it and it would be moist in time of drought and yielding to the native hoe. He decided on mixed farming.

The farm lay at the apex of a triangle of cultivated areas. The road, cut through the descending shelf of the plateau, drained well and, apart from a period toward the end of the Long Rain, was always accessible to markets. There were some twenty farmsteads at that time, a few Indian trading posts, a new Dutch Protestant Mission under the pastorship of a man named Kleinert and a brick barn devoted to the production of vaccines for cattle diseases and dignified with the title Lugard Veterinary Research Station. Farther north at Mababe were the bungalows of the Administration; and from there the road and the railway ran two hundred miles across country to Port of Kuru.

But the lip of habitation projected only to the boundary of Malcolm Sloan's land; beyond his fence an escarpment levelled into savanna and this plain lost itself in the haze of distance. They felt the plain as a presence. It seemed to ebb and flow like a sea; sometimes near and purposive and reaching with its heavy smell of succulence into the house itself, sometimes far, withdrawn into regions of windless silence. Behind its haze lay that shore of marsh and ravine which led to the mountains and the valleys of the Suswa. All this—the plateau and the plain and the areas of forest and mountain that enclosed the valleys—was known as Mirembe. There was no town

or tribe or river of this name and none knew whence the name derived.

The years at Mirembe had been the truly formative ones. The taproot of youth and early manhood had grown deep into those fat red lands; not even the war had disrooted him. He had found in their wild strength that security which his father could not give him. They had nourished him and it seemed later that he had become integrated with their rhythms, reflecting within himself all their changing moods and colours.

The fence on the perimeter ran in a circuit of pales, rush and wire and it separated ten acres of orchard from the escarpment. A barred gate was set therein and its width was sufficient to admit a team and waggon. The fence served as an obstacle to the wild creatures, it defined the limit of their tenancy and, too, was the boundary of the settled lands. But to the boy it was more than that. Insecure and weak-jointed it was yet a barrier and he had come to resent it; it divided the lands which had been brought into bondage by plough and the hand of man from those wild terrains whose substance he could smell, disturbingly, on the winds. Restiveness drove him always to the gate. He had been forbidden to open it or climb it or go beyond it and it became in time a symbolic thing. Through the pattern of its bars he could see the escarpment descending to great table-lands of scrub and thornbush. There had been sorties for wood and water in the company of his father and the Suru boys: the tracks of the waggons ran in deep sun-baked ruts from the gate and down the escarpment and on to the fringe of the plain. But these were journeys of expedience, not of adventure; he had sat on the seat-board and the plain had retreated and there had been nothing but the fly-thick cruppers of the horses and the creak of axles, the jerk of Malcolm Sloan's unkempt head and the arc of spittle, plumes of dust; nothing but that. There were journeys to be made; but alone and in silence. Soon he would follow the ruts to the point of disappearance, walk until the signs of men and their habitations were behind him. Already he had learned this value of solitude: later, in defiance, when he opened the gate to step across the oblique shadows of the palings the evening land had a quality of stillness and the sun seemed to draw its redness upward in a vapour of roseate light and the sound of the bar falling into the catch behind him was like the striking off of a fetter; even the air tasted different.

In Mirembe in those days there was no Government school south of Mababe: and Mababe lay thirty miles beyond the outlying settlements. The Catholic societies had not yet infiltrated the country

and it was left to Kleinert and his wife and a lay preacher named Trip to provide an elementary schooling for the European children. Kleinert, a small ugly man in his thirties with ginger hair and white eyelashes and a habit of probing with his little finger into permanently waxed-up ears, had presented himself to Malcolm Sloan and suggested mildly that the boy attend the Mission. That, too, was a day he remembered. Kleinert stood on the threshold in a shaft of sunlight that caught the thin ginger hair and exposed the sweaty white scalp beneath it: the pale eyes stared in curiosity at the leaning jambs of the doorway and Malcolm Sloan's desperate yellow face. The men talked and the pastor's voice was as light and puny as his body. The boy watched, feeling the growth of contempt; such insignificance had no place in a new and virile land. This little red carrot of a man would take him from the crops and the fruiting orchards and the wind off the plain and imprison him in a room stale with breathed air, books and bibles. 'I won't go,' he said. He hated Kleinert in that moment.

'Just three times a week,' Kleinert urged.

'You'd better go, Harry,' Malcolm Sloan said casually. Some dormant sense of responsibility quickened within him. The voice sharpened. 'You'll go all right.'

'Then it's agreed,' Kleinert said. The finger explored the left ear, pressing inward in an effort to clear the drum. They heard it click and the boy saw his father's mouth tighten in distaste.

'Yes,' Malcolm Sloan said. 'It's agreed.'

The boy felt the beginning of panic. The fence, the gate, this pastor and his sunless Mission and his ant-eaten books—what else awaited him? He stared in confusion at Kleinert's smiling face. He could not rationalise the fear which had overtaken him: it was concerned with the shadows of cages, with webs spun in dripping forests, with the bars which men built around their freedoms. Later, he came to recognise it very well.

'I know you'll like it,' Kleinert said.

The boy shrugged. He could see the sweep of sky over Kleinert's shoulder and a pair of fish-eagles in flight, the heads dipping snow-white into sun. The panic died. Mirembé would cast off this carrotty runt. It was a place for eagles.

But it had not been like that.

The Mission was a slate-roofed building of whitewashed walls and heavy Dutch furniture and cross-gartered ceilings from the beams of which hung leaves of palm and sisal, ears of maize. He had

stared in puzzlement and the pastor explained: 'Mrs Kleinert puts it there.' Then, sadly: 'For decoration.' They had looked upward at the absurd yellowing scraps and, at that moment, Mary Kleinert came in and he saw the pastor's white-fringed eyes brim with affection. Simple pleasure creased the ugly face and he sensed that he had misjudged him, that the missionary contained a deep well of kindness. The woman was slight, the face, neck and forearms discoloured with freckles, the hair as ginger as her husband's. Kleinert took her hand and they talked to him, the hands still linked and their plain pink faces flushed with animation. The voices were alike and they spoke excitedly in eager unfinished sentences, each interrupting the other on the pause for breath. There was an impression that they spoke from one mouth, from some common fount of words. He had never seen such love and identity in married people. He could not take his eyes from the intertwining fingers and the pastor and his wife were suddenly quiet and Mary Kleinert said seriously: 'You lost your mother, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'We heard about it.'

'Come on,' Kleinert said. 'We'll show him the schoolroom.'

It was Kleinert who had opened his mind. In that spider-haunted schoolhouse where the sun fell in narrow bars from unblinded window-slits he learned a new kind of excitement. It had been irksome at times and there were tantalising airs from the plains to enter with the insects and the sun-bars and defeat momentarily the smells of chalk and pencils and varnished maps. But Kleinert was there with his rapid chalk-stained hands and his fluting voice, his intense nervous energy and the duster which he flapped with such violence that coloured clouds of chalk-dust seemed always to billow down the sunbeams. They stared from a lethargy of African heat through the revolving motion of the beams to this vigorous little man who reached and pirouetted before the blackboard, whose pliant face grimaced with the effort of instruction; if the boy half-closed his eyes he seemed to caper like a small ginger monkey.

But he was a teacher.

He had come from a Boer settlement on the fringe of the Southern Karroo; a place of dry gullies and ironstone koppies which reflected heat as from a mirror, of Karroo-bush that burned in arid velds of browning vegetable. The taste of erosion had lain too long in his mouth and he had brought his parched and flagging spirit to Mirembe like a man in search of water. It was this thirst and the sense of revival which he communicated to them: it seemed at

times that he too stood as a child on the verge of awareness. He taught with simplicity and with fervour and the boy knew, now and in retrospect, that he had turned him deliberately like a plant to the sun. He had grown to love Kleinert and his ugly freckled woman. They gave him, in return, a sharing of their own passion for discovery, their joy in the lands of Mirembe.

At this time the boy's yearning, felt but not understood, had suddenly taken meaning. He had known that the plain and the terrains beyond had the power to disturb him. There was a compulsion to move out into them, without destination or conscious direction, to yield, perhaps to be swallowed. Sometimes when the rains were near and the land was cast in brooding silence he felt its pulse like a drum in the blood. Its beauty became ominous and Kleinert saw this, recognised within himself a similar unease. 'It is the fear of wild places,' he told the boy. 'It lives within us because that was the way of it in the beginning. And some of us are drawn irresistibly to the thing we fear—like a gazelle that walks with deliberation toward a waiting beast of prey.' The pastor pointed with his chalky finger to the plain. 'Old Gingerbread don't know much about it really. But we'll find out together, eh?'

And so it had been.

There were five of them to make these explorations; the pastor and Mary Kleinert, himself and the Maclaren twins—red-curled, effervescent boys whose family farmed high on the eastern escarpment. Kleinert led them by waggon or on foot, down into the savannas and sometimes as far as the sedges at the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge. The pastor brought great ignorance and energy to these excursions; he was learning and he approached that land of infinite variety as if it were a book whose pages lay spread in light before him. A naturalist by instinct there was no plant or tree or wild creature or insect which he passed without scrutiny. 'It's strange,' the boy heard him tell Mary Kleinert. 'But these children see through *my* eyes. It ought to be the other way round. *They* are the ones who should marvel and find the wonder in things. But it isn't like that at all.'

The wilderness lost its element of fear. There were perils, hazards of rock, swamp and river, the predators to whom Kleinert always referred as 'the murderers'. But he walked with knowledge: and even the daily tragedies of stalk and kill (those spurts of dust and the ripple of shock that ran and spent itself in the game herds) had no power to horrify. Here there were immutable patterns and life fed on life and death was only a component. The plain itself was a stage

on which these patterns continuously enacted themselves: absolute laws were produced by which both man and beast could live. Boy though he was he felt himself subject to them. Later, for a time, the books and the words and the complexities of human relationships and his own maturity fell across these simple truths like debris into the clarity of a pool.

He had passed into youth and still the plateau and its great red shelves supported a multitude of game, seasonal chains of migratory animals. Sometimes the nomad tribes moved across and there were warriors with thin spears and herds of skeletal cattle and sheep that came in thousands and were like goats in their fleeces of rough brown kemp. These wanderers fascinated him and he liked to go with the Maclarens and watch them in silence until the arrogant braided heads were gone into rising dust. They moved on predestined trails without end or beginning and there was something in this rootless people which affected him and brought him to the brink of tears. 'Look well at it,' Kleinert told him gently. 'That is freedom. You may not see it much longer.'

Mirembe lay on the fringe of the fly belt. The plateau and the immediate plain were too high and moist for the development of the fly and the tsetse had its focus in the low savannas, pupating in the dry friable earth of the bush and following the game into the regions east of the valley. But in that year of nineteen-thirty-nine the rain delayed and a drought of rare severity crept in brown vistas of parching vegetation to the periphery of the settlement itself. The game turned from its accustomed route in search of pasture and, too, the Masai came with herds of great concentration. These were the agents that brought to Mirembe the horse, dog and cattle disease known as Nagana.

It had begun, for Harry Sloan, in a patch of shade between the barns. He had gone there at noon to share a bottle of tepid Kenya beer with Forde—an assistant from the veterinary research station. They talked in desultory fashion, sitting, legs stretched from shadow into an arc of heat. He had pulled his boots inward from this discomfort and he had seen the fly on his left toe-cap. He examined it idly.

'Glossina,' Forde told him.

'What?'

'Tsetse to you.'

Sloan stared at it. It was like a stable fly, big, with a thick proboscis and wings that overlapped in repose like the blades of scissors.

'You must have seen it before,' Forde said. He lifted it by the

wing-tip. 'You can tell it by those brown veins on the wings.' He twisted it to the lateral view. 'And see the gut—it's fat with blood.' He crushed it, smiling. 'Nothing unusual.'

It had been the harbinger of a period of loss and devastation. The wild game and the Masai herds, immune themselves, had brought the trypanosome to Mirembe. In those exceptional conditions of heat and dryness the fly proliferated; soon, the carcasses of beasts flared on the farmsteads and the sky was curled with smoke from their incineration. There were mass injections of arsenicals for native and European, bush clearance along the lines of communication. 'It won't do much damage among the people,' Forde said. 'But the cattle and the horses . . .' He shrugged. 'Nagana . . .' Malcolm Sloan lost his entire stock and the yellow face became wild with hate; hate for the game and for the Masai who had brought him catastrophe. The Administration decreed destruction of all the game that abounded on the plateau.

Until then the rifle had been a tool to him: no more, no less. There had been a brief phase at the beginning of adolescence when it had excited him; when, having the emotive power of all mechanisms of death, he had wanted nothing but the feel of its blue metal, the grain of the stock against his fingers. But the phase had passed and it became another implement of the farm; a provider of meat, a maker of noise when the fruit was menaced.

At that time there was no policy of game conservation in Mirembe, no pattern of controlled areas and reserves wherein the species found a measure of protection. Settlers devised their own means of stock and crop defence and professional hunters were sent by Government when the occasion demanded. They came to Mirembe, four men versed in this business of systematic slaughter, and they went down into the plain at the head of parties of enlisted farmers; there began that orgy of killing which he would never forget. The plain was divided into sectors, cunningly related to game-trails, watercourses and migratory routes. He and Malcom Sloan had been assigned to a team under the direction of a quiet man named Vickery. 'It's mainly antelope that carries it,' Vickery told them. 'And that's what we concentrate on. But there's a bit of doubt about the other game, especially near water. So we shoot up the lot—the whole damn lot. I want reasonable estimates of everything killed and you *must* report any dangerous game that you've hit but haven't finished.' He knocked out his pipe on the heel of his boot. 'And go easy on the scavengers. We need something to clear up the mess.'

Only Kleinert realised the enormity of these missions of extirpation. In the weeks that followed he saw the plain denuded of its wild life. The sound of rifle-fire came sometimes on the wind to the Mission; loud at first, then faint with distance as they drove survivors to the valley. The red face puckered in misery; something irreplaceable was going. He felt as empty as that still savanna. 'Why do you take part in it?' he asked Harry Sloan. 'Look at it . . . like a graveyard. Why?'

He could not answer. He knew only that the rifle had taken possession of him, that his hands and eyes and the pad of muscle beneath his shoulder-bones had been made for it, that he was incomplete without it, that he craved the weight and feel and smell of it, that he loved and feared it for its expertise in death, that he wanted, wanted, wanted it, the wanting coming to the palate and the senses in waves of unappeasable lust, the whole of life seen and measured against a leaf-sight, perfect only in that astounding second of correlation between gun and target. He could not explain this to Kleinert: it was beyond expression. He could not even explain it, justify it to himself. The guilt was there and he could only stifle it by surrendering again to this terrible compulsion to kill. He had moved away from Kleinert and it seemed that a chasm had opened between them—that unbridgeable gulf which separates the violent from the meek.

'Things of beauty,' Kleinert said in reproach. 'Living things . . .'

Living things. The phrase startled him. That was the key to it, perhaps; that movement of horn or muscle or tail, that shift of shadow, which brought the rifle to the shoulder in a reflex which had no conscious motive. The movement stopped and life was gone and it was like a release; a small triumph; a proof of power: as if his own life-force were exalted and the air purer and the fruits of the earth sweeter because some other creature ceased to live. He sensed this; like a prick of light in the mind that went even in the moment of coming, went because the rifle was heavy in his hands and the smell of cordite was on his fingers and there were cartridge-clips in his pockets that knocked satisfyingly against his hip-bones when he walked. These were the real things. He watched Kleinert's miserable face and it seemed that the pastor's insipid world of love and gentleness retreated into infinite distance. He nodded and he said sarcastically: 'All God's creatures . . .'

'Yes,' Kleinert said. 'All God's creatures. That's one of my sayings and I daresay it amuses people to hear me say it. But it's what I believe. Without a reverence for life there is no faith, no God. You

can destroy or preserve—there is no middle course. You are like a man who fells a tree because it is dangerous or it excludes light or because he needs the space it occupies. These are the reasons he gives but they are not the real reasons. He will destroy it because it has strength and beauty, immovable roots, a permanence and a span of life which he is denied. Don't get like that, Harry. Please don't get like that . . .' The forefinger probed the ear. 'You are nineteen now—and that's not exactly an age for compassion. But the day will come when you will have to choose.'

Sloan stroked the barrel of the rifle. It was hot from the early sun. He began to finger its mechanism, idly working the safety-catch. He could see Kleinert's white-lashed eyes watching the weapon and he cocked the hammer, deliberately released it so that the pin struck home into the empty chamber. He did this several times. He said unkindly: 'You should get your ears syringed.'

He shared his guilt with his father. For Malcom Sloan the killing crystallised all the years of defeat, loneliness and ultimate loss into a shape of such ugliness that even Vickery recognised its unquiet form. 'Take it easy,' he told him. 'You've been hit—like most of the chaps round here. But you don't have to take it so personal. After all, they don't *know* they're carrying the bloody trypo.' On that day they had destroyed a herd of three hundred zebra and wildebeest and the hill of acacia savanna lay beneath them in slopes of bird-heaving carrion; Malcolm Sloan's febrile face and hands shook with the passion of his killing. He killed without pity, following the game herds through the yellow heats of day, not pausing for food or rest and drinking in nervous gulps from his bottle so that the water ran from the mouth to twist the beard into dark wet spikes. They were at one in this killing, each cross-infected by the other's unpitied skill, each the host to a lust which would not expend or exhaust itself but which grew and consumed, drove them to further excess.

It had ended, in ridicule, at the base of a small hillock twenty miles into the plain where they had brought the Ford truck to a patch of tree-shadow: steam broke on the radiator. 'We'll wait,' Malcolm Sloan said. 'It's near boiling.' They sat in silence and heat enfolded them and they felt the pressure of the clouds which massed dark behind the escarpment. The rains, near now, had begun to dominate the mind and men studied the sky and smelled the loaded air: waiting. Then Malcolm Sloan said: 'There's something there.'

'Where?'

'That hole in the bank. I saw it.'

They watched but there was no movement.

'I tell you I saw it.'

Harry Sloan felt the sweat run in the crease of his groin. The cumulus had the colour of ashes and it moved in slow formations, the clouds so heavy, so engorged with water it seemed they would topple and spill like gourds: there was a feeling of deluge and he was aware, suddenly, of a deep need, every cell of him craved for it; for water that would beat and scour and cleanse away the evidence of those bloody weeks.

'There it is,' Malcolm Sloan whispered.

It was a small, tawny-brown creature, no larger than a rat, with a snout like a miniature trunk. It emerged, leapt once and returned to the hole.

'It's a shrew.'

'We've got to get it,' Malcolm Sloan said seriously.

He nodded and they climbed from the truck. They held their rifles in the crooks of their arms and they approached the hole with great caution. They did not see their absurdity; this dedicated pursuit of a small and insignificant thing. They knew only that it moved and lived within their vicinity, that its life was an affront: the weeks of killing had conditioned them to its destruction. 'Kill it,' Malcolm Sloan said thickly. 'Kill it.' He worked the bolt of the rifle. There was nothing incongruous in the use of a high-velocity shell for this minute creature around which he could have closed his fist. Vickery's truck had aligned itself to the Ford but they did not hear it, so great was their concentration. They each fired two shots into the hole and the red soil spurted and was cast immediately on the wind. Malcolm Sloan peered into the hole. 'I don't know,' he said. Then: 'See if there's an exit hole on the other side.'

Harry Sloan walked around the hillock, came back. 'No. There's no hole.'

'Let's put another shot in. Then we'll block it up to make certain.'

They fired carefully into the hole.

'That ought to do it.'

Vickery came with Johnny Maclaren. He said, with curiosity: 'What have you two got in there? A man-eater or something?'

The wall of the hole collapsed and the shrew leapt out, ran in a rapid jumping movement under the truck and around the hillock.

Vickery stared. 'Is *that* what you're after?'

'Yes.'

'Six shells and all this palaver for *that*?'

'It's only a titchy little jumping-shrew,' Maclaren said. He

laughed and the red pompadour of hair fell across his temple. 'What were you going to do with it, Harry? Mount it?'

'Shut up.'

Vickery smiled. 'Or a nice fur mitten.'

'You're very funny,' Malcolm Sloan whispered. He had developed a nervous tic which afflicted his face in times of stress: the left cheek began to work in quick regular tremors and, suddenly, the face was terrible in the greening light and the humour left them and they were silent before this wild-eyed man.

Vickery said: 'It's over now, anyway. The plain's clear of game. I'll bring my blokes in and we'll call it off.' He looked upward. 'The wet's here, thank God.'

'It's not over,' Malcolm Sloan said. The voice was petulant.

Vickery filled his pipe. 'We'll have a puff. Then we'll get back.'

'I tell you, it's *not* over,' Sloan insisted. He pointed over Vickery's shoulder.

Vickery turned. Distant, but sharply-defined in the rain-laden air, were the shapes of cattle: they moved in listless lines, the light glinting olive on the dipping bosses. There were thin robed herds-men and the spears were like needles at that distance. 'Don't be silly,' he said. 'We can't touch them. You know that as well as I do.'

'I know only that I lost my stock.'

Vickery shook his head. 'We can't touch Masai cattle.'

'They brought the sleepy sickness, didn't they?'

'It's possible.'

'We've killed five thousand head of game these last three weeks,' Malcolm Sloan said. 'Five thousand. And the plain's clean. Are you going to let these dirty apes bring their bug-ridden cows up to the farms again?'

'I'll turn 'em round.'

'They'll turn for no one.'

'He's right, Mr Sloan,' Marlaren said. 'We can't touch Masai stock. Not unless they're infected.'

'Which is almost never,' Vickery said. 'They've become resistant.'

'But they're carriers.'

'Yes, they're carriers. But try telling that to a Masai. Try *explaining* it.'

Malcolm Sloan tapped his rifle. 'They'd understand. They'd understand all right.'

'You're potty.'

'Maybe. But not so potty I don't know what those apes 've done to me.'

'I'll repeat it,' Vickery said. 'We can't touch them. And that's my last word on it.'

'Let's get back,' Harry Sloan said.

The rains had not broken and, with darkness, they felt the weight of that poised mountain of cloud. There was a strange electric quality in the night, a suggestion of blue light; it was charged with some elemental force which told of lightning, storm and whirlwind and they felt its energy like pulses in the brain. It drove Malcolm Sloan from room to room, from barn to outhouse, from well to kitchen: he could not keep still. The gaunt face came and went in the light of lamps; it touched mirrors in fleeting images of unrest; it hung in silhouette on the rim of shadow, the beard askew: when it turned the flesh shone with sweat. Later, he came to the room where they lived and at that moment the mechanism of the clock began to falter and they stood face to face, aware of the sound of its labour. Malcolm Sloan stared at it and the eyes were quizzical as if the clock and its agitated heart had some significance which he could not comprehend. It was important, suddenly, that the clock continue and they were afraid and Malcolm Sloan stepped toward it, reaching, and in that second the clock stopped and they stood in a stillness of pain and memory, hearing only their faint respiration, rapid in the humid night. It seemed that time was suspended, that they were disconnected from all that had gone before. Malcolm Sloan said: 'I'm going down for that cattle, Harry. Are you coming?'

'No.'

He had heard the truck move from the farm and down the dirt road and he listened until the sound was inaudible. He thought he heard rain but it was the wings of moths: he watched them beat in frenzy in the orbit of yellow lamp-light, their shadows grotesque on the walls. He extinguished the lamp. In darkness the wet heat closed around him. The room was unstill and he covered his face with his hands and flesh slipped on flesh and he sat there at the centre of its restless motion and the brain threw images of snow and glaciers and cliffs of ice. Something was ending and he had no power to affect it, no power even to escape this weight of liquid blackness which rocked him like a cork in water. There was sound: the tap of insects, wind in the bracts of bougainvillea, raucous lungs which seemed to inflate within rough dried walls. But then the sounds merged and were indistinguishable and there was no awareness of the passage of time, only this corset of heat and airless-

ness which held him without will or capacity to move. Later, the mechanism of the clock came to him, growing in insistence as of noise breaking the barrier of sleep and he heard it from afar then nearer then within him like the pulsation of his own blood. The sound released him; as if time had resumed and something new had already begun. He lighted the lamp and went to the clock and its sound was true and clear and he could see the slight shift of the minute-hand. He left the house for the barns where the trucks were kept.

He had driven down the escarpment and into the plain, orientated by a blue glow of static lightning which hung in the west. This was the trail of the nomad herds. He drove until he cut this trail, until the headlamps found the pale marks of erosion spread outward from the hoof-tracks, cakes of cattle dung. He lost it once where the plain undulated into hillocks and he brought the truck in a wide circle until he met the shallow depression through which the herd had passed. There were no dead fires, no evidence of sojourn; the only signs of passage the scarred earth and the fresh dung. They would move through the night, he knew: down the declivity to the damp pasture of the sedges. Fear had communicated to his foot and he drove slowly, watching the limbs of thorn acacia reach like petrified arms into the beams, yellow-grey, fall with an illusion of motion into the wake of blackness behind him.

He found Malcolm Sloan's Ford in the centre of the trail. Its cabin was empty. The radiator was hot and the pasteboard tatters of cartridge-boxes were strewn on the floor. He took the truck farther down the trail, braking again when the shapes of boulders came suddenly from the wall of darkness to the limit of the beams. The boulders were cattle and they lay humped and massive in postures of death.

He stopped the truck by the first of the carcasses; dead eyes leered obscenely in the beam. He got out, walked among them, smelling their odours of urine and hide and congealing blood. The sense of catastrophe had left him. It was all predictable, all moving with inevitability toward an end.

There were ten dead beasts and he judged from the location of the wounds that the shots had come from a thorn thicket off the trail. The blackness intensified when he left the channels cut by the headlamps and he paused, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The electric glow returned perceptibly to the sky and the tops of the thorn grew to silhouette and he saw something white, like a hanging rag, on the thicket.

He walked toward it.

Waves of heat came off the plain and he felt his mouth parch with an immediate need for water. Malcolm Sloan had been speared and then impaled on the thorn. He hung a foot from the ground. He was like some doll thrown away in contemptuous discard, to catch in falling, to tear and then flutter in wind until disintegration. Looking up at that bearded face and the arms spread in a mimicry of crucifixion he felt an instant shock; his mind fled backward to the pictures in Kleinert's books and he could only stare in love and in pity and it seemed for a second that he had stepped into one of those painted groups of adoration. Then he reached upward and lifted Malcolm Sloan from the tree, brought him to the paling ground beyond the thicket. He could smell the tobacco in the beard and that odour, a part of childhood like the lavender, seized him in so strong a wave of memory that he began to weep, silently at first, then in long paroxysms of pain. The rain began in that moment of abandonment. He felt it gather in his hair. It grew swiftly into deluge and it was like a curtain to his grief.

The war in Europe began a week after that and he left Mirembé, crossing the border with the Maclarens into Kenya to enlist. Later, they went to Burma with the Second East African Division where they learned further techniques of killing.

Part 2

THE GORGE

AT THAT DISTANCE THERE were only the shapes of trucks and tents, a few tenuous figures shifting through pools of sunlight. Then, nearing, the metal of the trucks shone with luminous blue paint and the tents were green triangles and Sloan saw the inscriptions on the doors grow into bold yellow letters. Mountain-of-the-Moon Safari Ltd, he read. The stylised heads of kudu decorated the panels. He braked the Land Rover and the safari trucks wavered gaudily behind the heat-waves from the radiator.

'It's Quinn's outfit,' Ellis said. He stared in distaste. It was like a travel poster, he thought; everything vividly coloured, the trucks and the green canvas tents posed in artful composition against the darker green of the shade-trees and the backcloth of flat blue sky. The engine had cut and he sat in silence, hearing the life of the plain reimpose itself in the faint whirr of insects. He watched a fly detonate on the windshield, its substance run then bake immediately on the heat of the glass. He smelt the plain again, this smell of scrub which seemed to breathe of illimitable distance.

'Let's get out,' Sloan said. 'You too, Pitt.'

The morning developed heat. They felt its burn on the knees and forearms. Four Luguru boys brushed without enthusiasm at the interiors of the trucks. They wore blue shirts embroidered with the kudu-horn emblem of the company. Two portmanteaux and a pile of folded garments lay by the trucks, some air-mattresses and a canvas holdall stencilled with the name of an American air-line. Quinn came from under the fly of the further tent, stood there, eyes narrowed against the sun. A towel coiled the neck and flecks of shaving-soap whitened the ear lobes. The face was red and intemperate, puffed with sleep. He was a squat, solid man with strong-jowled features. He walked toward them and the chest bulged in the string vest and the legs seemed to yield under the weight of the body. It was this peculiarity of gait, this heavy implanting of the feet that distinguished him. Sloan watched his approach. He had known Quinn for many years, had seen the blue safari-train come out of morning mists, glint in vertical suns, dissolve into the vapours of evening. It had crossed his binoculars a hundred times, leaving always the taste of disquiet. Quinn, the professional trophy-hunter,

trundled across the plains of the Territory like some harbinger of destruction. Quinn brought the odour of cordite and the high-velocity shell and the flensing-knife. Quinn, the gross and the ungainly, brought an ending to things of grace.

'You're out early,' Quinn said.

'I saw your fires.'

'My fires?'

'From the gorge. Last night.'

'From the gorge,' Quinn repeated. Sleep had not yet left him.

'That's right,' Ellis said. 'We're on a trip. Anti-poaching.' He felt spiteful. He hated white hunters; the cultivated masculinities, the cartridges worn ostentatiously like badges on the breast, the absurd bits of leopard skin twisted nonchalantly about the hats. He hated them all right—the whole bloody ilk. 'You ought to have neon lights,' he said. He gestured at the painted trucks. 'Just the thing for a show like this.'

'A funny man,' Quinn said. 'A funny little fat man.'

'Drop it,' Sloan said.

'You want something?' Quinn asked.

'You're in a controlled area.'

Quinn nodded.

'You have a permit?'

'Sure.'

'Let me see it.'

Quinn wiped soap from his ears. 'Is all this necessary?'

'I think so.'

'You want some breakfast?'

'No. Just the permit.'

'You better meet my clients.'

They had come from the larger of the tents; a man and a woman beyond the middle age. The man blinked against the sunlight. He was wide and soft in the body, the face pallid and the nose burned red. It gave him a clown-like appearance. 'Just a moment,' he said. 'I got to get some lotion.' He went back into the tent and the woman stood awkwardly, staring at the plain and the milky mist which hung, still, where the curve met the sky. Like the flounce on a blue dress, she thought. She smiled, pleased with the originality of an image which had come unbeckoned to her mind. She was a heavy woman with faded brown hair and a high white dress and a neck which, thickened at the base, looked slightly goitrous.

'Mrs Krebs,' Quinn said.

'That's right,' the man said. He came from under the fly. The

chest, now, was festooned with the straps of Leicas, crossed like bandoliers. He held an opened bottle of lotion in his left hand. 'Mr and Mrs Kreb.'

'From Ohio,' the woman explained.

Quinn said softly: 'We have the dollar with us.'

They came forward. 'We don't like to get burned,' Kreb said. 'We both got burned down in Pretorius Kop. Now we take great care.' He offered the bottle to the woman. 'Would you like some, dear?' The woman accepted a small brown pool in the palm of her hand and they stood there, patting lotion into their flaccid cheeks.

'This is Sloan,' Quinn said. 'One of the Game Wardens.'

'You don't say?'

'A big man round here.'

Kreb's hand went to the Leica.

'No,' Quinn said sarcastically. 'You've no permit to film Game Wardens . . .'

'A permit?' Kreb asked. 'You mean . . .?' The rosebud mouth smiled. 'You're joking, I see . . .' He held out his hand to Sloan, then withdrew it. 'We can't shake hands—full of oil.'

'Ohio,' Mrs Kreb repeated. She spoke with nostalgia.

Kreb said sharply: 'Don't keep on about Ohio. We have the rest of our lives to spend in Ohio. We're in Africa now.'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'In the Murembe Steppe Controlled Area. And I'd like to see your permits.'

'You have to be so damn formal?' Quinn asked.

'Why not?' Kreb said. 'Everything's fixed.' He smiled at Sloan, touched the Leica. 'It's funny, you know. You get so you don't want to miss a single thing. It's a kind of a reflex. In the end you start filming stupid things that aren't worth a look—let alone the price of a film—'

'Like Game Wardens,' Quinn said.

'One day,' Sloan said evenly, 'you must say that to me when we're alone.'

'Be careful,' Ellis said. The voice shook with dislike. 'Remember—he's the King of the White Hunters.'

'I'll see those permits now,' Sloan said.

Quinn went to the truck, pulled papers from a briefcase. 'There's a photography permit and a general game licence . . .' He gave them to Sloan. 'And some supplementaries. That satisfy you?'

Sloan examined them.

'Have some breakfast,' Kreb suggested.

Sloan said to Quinn: 'How long have you been out?'

'Three days.'

'From Arupa?'

'Yes.'

'I'll see your bag.'

'You should've been a copper,' Quinn said. 'A nose-y bloody copper.'

'Where is it?'

'Second truck.'

Sloan went to the truck.

'Have we done something wrong?' Kreb asked anxiously. The red nose shone with oil. A river of lotion ran from the jowl to the throat. 'We haven't shot much and I paid a lot of money for those licences . . .'

'He'll give you a refund,' Quinn said.

Kreb touched Sloan's arm. 'Do we get a refund?'

'No.'

'But he said——'

'He's a comedian,' Ellis said. 'An Irish comedian.'

'There's no refund,' Sloan said abruptly. 'Very few people shoot a licence out—thank God.' He looked into the rear of the truck, sorted the hides. There were a few zebra skins, the pelt of a blue monkey, a bundle of waterbuck and duiker hides, a pair of horns that lay like a black varnished lyre in the well of the spare wheel.

'As you can see,' Quinn said, 'we haven't had much luck.'

Pitt stared over Sloan's shoulder. A piece of yellow fat adhered where the horns joined the skull and flies whipped and dived above its odour. The skins were recognisable but none of them had any relevance to the creatures whose bones and tissues they had covered. These were quite different. These were devoid of life, totally unconnected with rhythms of flesh and sinew, the flow of movement. He lifted the edge of a waterbuck skin. It was stiff and dead and it had never run or sprung or trembled in alert silhouette on the brink of pools. It was like a cheap, crudely-cut rug. He had seen the lechwe poised in the swamps, the mouth dipped to the surface to crop the water plants and when it shifted the fragile legs came from the water in slow delicate withdrawals with hardly a ripple to disturb its reflection. He let it fall and it seemed that he had cast it from him in disgust. He saw that Sloan was watching him, knew that this grave bearded man had seen and understood his rejection. Sloan said: 'They'll take it back to Ohio and stick it on the floor and spill whisky and cigarette-ash on it.'

'And why not?' Quinn's voice said behind them. 'You had the

cash for the licences.' He scratched himself. A heat rash spread in pink pustules from the chest to the shoulder. He pointed to Kreb. 'This is the bloke that pays your salary, Sloan.'

Kreb asked: 'Everything's all right, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Mr Sloan don't much care for the hunting industry,' Quinn said unpleasantly.

'And I don't blame him,' Mrs Kreb said. 'Butchering those poor animals. When that monkey fell out that tree I felt quite ill——' She massaged lotion into her sagging flesh.

'Silly talk,' Kreb said gently. 'Silly, simple talk. We paid seven thousand dollars a head for this trip. Seven thousand beautiful green dollars. We have to take *something* back . . .'

'You'll have your pictures,' Sloan said. 'That's better than a lot of third-rate trophies.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Kreb said uneasily. 'Everyone else takes things home. Things for the floors and walls, I mean . . .'

'They guarantee it,' Mrs Kreb said.

'They?'

'The Tour.'

'Congo-Exotics Incorp. From the States to the Congo,' Kreb explained. 'They lay the whole thing on.' He held up the bottle of lotion. 'Right down to the sun-oil.'

'I have a pamphlet here,' Mrs Kreb said. She unfolded a sheet of coloured type.

Kreb took it from her. 'I'll read it, dear. I'm a better reader than you.'

Sloan checked his watch. 'Time's going——'

'Listen,' Kreb said. 'Listen to this.' He began to read. '“Follow the trail of Livingstone and Stanley. Pick giant orchids in primeval rain-forests. Adventure to the Ruwenzori and the Mountains of the Moon. Dance with the giant Watuzi warriors . . .”' He smiled. 'Corny, isn't it?'

'There's a bit more on the back, Ira,' Mrs Kreb said.

Kreb turned it. 'Oh, yes. Canoe among the swarming saurians of Lake Rudolf——'

'Crocodiles,' Mrs Kreb explained to Sloan.

'—See live volcanoes in action . . .' Kreb stared at the hills. 'Are those volcanoes?'

'Well, they *are* volcanoes,' Ellis said.

'Real volcanoes?'

'Yes.'

'When did they——?'

'About two thousand years ago.'

'Oh,' Krebs looked discomfited. 'It doesn't matter. We did Europe a month or so back—Etna and Vesuvius. If you've seen one volcano you've seen the lot.'

'We'll have some coffee,' Mrs Krebs said placidly. 'All of us together . . .'

She moved heavily to the tent, to the collapsible table which stood in its shadow. Quinn followed.

'Mr Sloan,' Krebs said. 'There's something I'd like to ask you.'

'Yes?'

'It's about lions.'

'Lion?'

'Yes. Are there many on the plain? This particular area of the plain?'

'You better ask Quinn. He's the man that's paid to find 'em for you.'

Krebs rubbed his blistered nose. 'You don't like tourists, do you?'

'No.'

'I heard about you in Arupa.'

'Good.'

'No. It isn't good. You have many enemies.'

'The white hunters?'

'Yes. And the tourist agencies.'

'To hell with them.'

'All right. To hell with them. To hell with the tourists and the agencies and the hunters. But between them . . .'

'Yes?'

'Between them they add up to a sizeable slice of opinion.'

'Should I worry about that?'

Krebs stared. 'I guess that wouldn't worry *you*. But I'll tell you something, Mr Sloan. It's the tourists will save your bacon. I'm a business-man and I've made a lot of money. I understand money—how to make it and how to use it, the way it works. Now I keep my ear to the ground; in fact, my company has substantial interests in East Africa. Things are changing round here. Your parks and reserves and wild game are not exactly safe, are they?'

'No.'

'And when the British leave they'll be a lot less safe?'

'That's right.'

'These Africans don't give a hang for animals and scenery . . .'

'Right again.'

'Well, you see what I mean. It's money that'll talk—the only sound they'll hear in those delicate black ears. The tourists bring a lot of money to the country. They'll go on doing that—so long you got game and wonderful wild places . . .' he gestured to the plain . . . 'But you think they're going to keep all this if the money don't flow? No, Mr Sloan. You take my advice. You look after the tourists. We're a corny, brassy, rubbernecking bunch. But we're the only hope you have.'

Sloan smiled. 'I like you, Mr Kreb. And you're absolutely right.'

Kreb said: 'I don't really want to shoot. I can't hit the damn things, anyway. Quinn hits them—and pretends it's me.'

'You want to film these lions?'

'In due course. But that wasn't why I asked.'

'I'll tell you what I can.'

'Good. You have many lions on this part of the plain?'

'Not many. There's a family down there, east of the hills. And there's an old chap lives in the wadis by the gorge. But——'

'But what?'

Sloan hesitated. He knew that he could not tell Kreb of the country through the gorge, of the valley and its pristine life. Kreb would find some means of getting there, take his Leicas into that lonely wilderness, trap it on film; in that way possess it. The valley, his valley would appear later on a screen in some Ohio lounge and they would gape through ginny breath and cigar-smoke at its sunlit innocence. Something prevented him from telling Kreb; the words would come like the betrayal of a trust. He said jealously: 'There's nothing much beyond the gorge. And the rains are due and you'd never get back.' He saw Kreb's brown eyes react to the evasion; a brief shadow of intelligence as if it had been immediately recognised—and understood.

Kreb persisted: 'Do lions move about much? From one area to another?'

'They'll move if they're driven. And at this time of the year they might follow the migrations for a bit. But generally they're pretty static.'

'Would a lion follow a safari?'

'Follow it?'

'Yes. Along its route.'

'You mean like a shark following a ship?'

'That's it.'

Sloan laughed.

'Yes, yes, I know it sounds stupid. But I have a reason for asking.'

'It's the sun-oil,' Ellis said derisively. 'It's the smell of the sun-oil.'

'Mr Sloan,' Kreb said. 'I *know* a lion is trailing this safari.'

'From Arupa?'

'Yes.'

'All the way here?'

'All the way.'

'That's about one hundred and forty miles.'

'Some lion,' Ellis said.

'I know,' Kreb agreed. 'And it'd sure have sore feet . . .'

'Maybe it got a lift.'

Kreb tapped his camera in irritation. He said stubbornly: 'I tell you a lion is following us. We're quite certain about this.'

'How can you be certain?'

'We recognise it.'

'I doubt you could do that. To a tourist most lions look alike. You might do it on the pug-marks. But I don't think . . .'

Kreb shook his head. 'You don't understand. We haven't actually seen it. It's the voice we recognise. It's quite distinctive. Three nights we've heard it, after dark, somewhere beyond the fires. Mrs Kreb and I sit up in bed and listen. You can't mistake it—a roar, a long pause, then a shorter roar, ending on a kind of long coughing grunt . . . And this comes twice, always twice. Then Quinn comes round and says not to worry and goes off on the prowl.' Kreb stared suspiciously. 'What are you two grinning at?'

'Nothing.'

Mrs Kreb called from the table: 'Don't you great big men want your coffee?'

'We're coming,' Kreb said. Then to Sloan: 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

Sloan smiled.

'Let's look around . . .'

Kreb led them to the smaller of the trucks. It lay back from the tent where Quinn and Mrs Kreb were sipping coffee. Kreb said softly: 'This is where Quinn keeps his gear.' They went to the rear and Kreb began to shift cases. 'Don't see anything,' he said.

'Try under the sacking,' Ellis said.

Kreb pulled the gunny, exposed a small canvas shape, rectangular, secured with a single buckle. 'This looks like it,' he said. He slipped the strap, withdrew its contents.

'It's a tape-recorder,' Pitt said.

'Yes,' Kreb agreed. 'A tape-recorder. You gentlemen care for some music?' He operated the control. The lion's voice swelled and

reverberated in the confines of the truck. They heard Quinn and Mrs Kreb and the Lugurus start to their feet. Kreb lifted the recorder, placed it on the ground. The voice paused and they heard, in that hiatus of sound, the whirl of flies; then it swelled again. It was ludicrous, Pitt thought; but still majestic, the essence of strength and challenge still there at the centre of derision.

Kreb said to him: 'Is that rifle loaded?'

'Yes.'

'May I borrow it?'

Pitt gave it to him.

Kreb thumbed the safety, levelled it, fired. The recorder jumped under the impact, skidded and overturned. A metal wheel ricocheted beneath the truck. Quinn came running. 'What the hell . . . !' He stared at the smashed recorder.

'A lion,' Kreb said calmly. 'I just shot a lion.'

Quinn pushed the wreckage with his foot. He was disconcerted and the hairy black fingers trembled on a package of cigarettes. He selected one, dropped it, retrieved it, stirred the remains of the recorder again.

'You done it in,' he said. 'That'll cost you forty quid.'

Kreb nodded. 'Sure. I'll deduct it from your tip.'

'The King of the White Hunters,' Ellis said with contempt. 'You should've been a disc-jockey.'

'Was that a good lion, Mr Sloan?' Kreb asked.

Sloan nodded gravely.

'A funny lot of bastards,' Quinn said. He began to smoke, expelling the smoke in twin streams through the wide nostrils. He said to Kreb: 'But you got what you wanted, didn't you? A nice cosy thrill, a little bit o' danger creeping up to your tent at night, something to tell your pals when you get back home . . .' He had regained composure. 'I know exactly what you Yanks want—and that's what I give you.'

'I wonder if you know,' Kreb said. 'I wonder if you know anything about us at all. I'm always surprised at the way in which the American abroad is treated—like some kind of gullible overgrown boy with more money than is good for him. I'm also surprised that you never seem to consider where the money comes from. It don't grow on trees, you know—not even American trees. Most of us work very hard; and if we make money—the kind of money that brings us on expensive packaged tours—that means we've worked a little harder than most. It also means we're not entirely weak in the head . . .' Kreb pointed to the plain and the distant bush. 'You

boys are proud of your bits of jungle. You seem to think a man needs special qualities to live in a place like this. But it isn't true. I'll tell you something, Quinn. I was raised in a jungle a good deal more dangerous than any you ever walked in. I built my business in a jungle. And I survived. I played it straight and I didn't make my fortune by duping a bunch of tourists . . .'

Mrs Krebs said uncomfortably: 'Can we have coffee now?'

'Yes,' Krebs said. He winked at Sloan. 'I want to show you my bulletins.'

In that ragged arc of shade where filtered light lay in scattered yellow coins they drank coffee and watched the last plumes of morning mist burn to nothing on the sky. One of the Lugurus fried bacon with complete concentration. Pitt felt relaxed, reluctant now to leave the cover of the trees for the developing heat of the steppe. It had changed subtly. There were pockets of glare and reflected ochrous light in which, he thought, the flesh of arms and legs would scorch at once.

Sloan told him: 'My father used to say it seethed like a batter-cake.'

'That's a good description.'

'What were you doing with a loaded rifle?'

Pitt flushed.

'An Army man should know better.'

'I thought——'

'You thought what?'

'Well, we *are* after poachers.'

'What do you think we do—shoot them?'

'I don't know.'

'It's not as simple as that.'

'I bet you wish it was,' Quinn said cynically.

'Sometimes.'

'But you do have a power of arrest?' Krebs asked.

'Yes. We obtained over eight hundred convictions last year in the District Courts.'

'That's serious.'

'But only a fraction of the number of offences. We haven't the staff, Mr Krebs. We can't patrol thousands of miles of plain and bush with a dozen trucks and a few hundred scouts and rangers. We can't protect wild creatures in a country that's basically indifferent to whether they survive or not. The African cares nothing for posterity, nothing for the trust he holds. His only heritage is a large empty belly. He craves meat like some men crave alcohol . . .'

Sloan pointed to the steppe. 'Now look out there. What do you see?'

Kreb stared through the line of Sloan's finger. 'There's a small herd of buffalo. Some zebra, a few wildebeest mixed in . . .'

'Pretty?'

'I guess so.'

'But not to an African. I'll tell you what it represents. First it's a meal . . . red meat of varying quality. The buffalo's very good and, up north, they'll cross from Uganda specially to poach it. The zebra's poor—but he'll dry into reasonable biltong. Then there's the cash value. For fresh meat they get up to two shillings a pound. Those zebra tails you can see swishing so daintily will fetch about fifteen shillings each; and the wildebeest tails twice that. There's a complete scale of charges that makes poaching very profitable to a native. A single hair from the tail of a giraffe will fetch twenty cents, an eland tail as much as sixty shillings—in fact, an eland tail out here is equivalent to the price of one cow or one bullock. They'll get twenty shillings for a leopard skin, five shillings for a lion claw. Everything's priced—and nothing's wasted—right down to the beer-bottle of lion fat which sells for five shillings . . .' Sloan stirred idly at the coffee grounds. 'I don't know the answer to this. Can we really expect a primitive to leave an object of value to roam freely? Expect him to preserve it because it has beauty or rarity? Can we?'

Kreb shook his head. 'It was the same with the American buffalo. Great herds that could have been preserved with a little care, a little legislation. But where are they now?'

Sloan said: 'It's not the meat-hungry peasant I'm after. Or even the traditional hunters. There are people in the valley whose tribal codes are related directly to the ritual of the hunt; tribes living by ancient cults that only find expression in the tracking and killing of game. Take that from them and they become husks. They wither. I don't want that to happen. I want to preserve them—and that means they'll have to be allowed to crop the game. It's the commercial meat hunters I'm after, the traffickers in valuable trophies like rhino horn, ivory and leopard skins.'

'An organised traffic?' Kreb asked.

'Part of it. On the one hand you have the poachers and small dealers who bury the horn and ivory in the bush until they find a buyer. And on the other hand you have the Asians in Port of Kuru who bring the stuff across country, load it on dhows and ship it to the Far East. India's the chief market. The price of ivory fluctuates;

but rhino horn is always high—as high as eighty-five shillings a pound . . .’

‘This is of real interest to me,’ Kreb said warmly. ‘I’m going to put all this in my next bulletin.’

‘Bulletin?’

‘I’ll show you.’

Kreb opened one of the portmanteaux. It contained a portable typewriter, a number of manilla folders, stapled sheafs of paper covered in typeprint. He lifted one, handed it to Sloan. ‘This is the latest. I finished it last night and it’ll be posted at the next town we strike. It’s a kind of diary. I got the idea when we first started the Europe tour. We ought to keep a record, I said to May, something detailed to go with the pictures. So I bought the typewriter; and one of your London firms sold me some carbon sets that give me up to twenty copies. Now what I do is this . . .’ Kreb’s voice lifted with enthusiasm. ‘I write a detailed bulletin at weekly periods and I post off nineteen copies to friends all over the States and Europe. They reply care of American Express—in fact that’s one of the conditions of receiving a bulletin. If they don’t take the trouble to answer I cross ’em off the list and they don’t get any more bulletins. The beauty of it is that everyone knows how we’re doing—and we always have lots of mail waiting for us somewhere ahead . . .’

‘He should have been a writer,’ Mrs Kreb said. ‘I always said so . . .’

‘I’m not bad,’ Kreb admitted. The face flushed with pride. ‘Actually they get printed in the local paper in Zebbvill—where we live.’

Sloan turned the pages. The copy was very indistinct. He read it casually. It was written in turgid prose, some of the nouns accompanied by at least four stalwart adjectives. There was a long description of a trek that Kreb had made with Quinn to shoot the lechwe; a passage in which Kreb confessed to aching muscles and a yearning for iced cola.

‘We’re really very tired,’ Mrs Kreb said quietly. ‘All this heat and travelling, first Europe, then all over Africa . . .’ The voice trailed into silence and Sloan studied her face, saw the stains of exhaustion beneath the eyes.

‘You’re doing too much,’ he said kindly. ‘You should stay in one place, take more rest.’

‘We’re too old,’ Kreb said. ‘That’s the truth of it. I used to dream of this trip when I was a boy. Africa—the very word was magic; forests, animals, great rivers—the Zambesi and the Congo and the

Nile. I wanted to take a rucksack and a rifle and just walk and walk and walk, sweat it out alone without even a watch or a book or a razor—a kind of journey backwards into something once known but forgotten. Then I went into commerce and I began to make money, getting a little older, staring up at cliffs of ferro-concrete instead of hills and mountains, watching my hair thin and my body grow white and fat like a slug, rearing a family, stuck in a great swamp of possessions and social duties from which I couldn't escape . . .' Kreb patted oil from his face. 'Then one day I found myself in the travel agency. I had money, leisure, freedom of choice and movement, sons to run my business. I thumbed through the brochures—lovely pamphlets in bright tropical colours—why, they even *smelled* exciting. My hands were trembling and I put them on the counter so that the clerk shouldn't notice. It was all coming true and I was a boy again and I saw, for a moment, all those tattered wonderful books I'd had as a child, pages as thick as cardboard and covered in big print and date-palms and yellow deserts and wild creatures. The clerk was a young fellow, about twenty I'd say, with dense black hair and one of those ripe skins that seem to bloom with health and youth. There was a large mirror behind him and as he bent low over the papers I caught sight of myself. It was unexpected. Normally, if a mirror hangs in a familiar place, you adjust yourself to it. You know you're going to see your reflection so you pose. It's a kind of self-flattery. But I hadn't time for that. All I saw was a man getting old, a man with a sagging chin and grey cheeks and streaks of hair plastered over the bald crown of his head, a face from which time had faded all the colour. I stared at it and this boy saw me staring and he turned and there was a second in which his beautiful young face was aligned to my own in the mirror. God, how that hurt me! It was like a sudden physical pain. He packed the papers in a fat brown envelope and he gave them to me and he said: "I envy you, sir." I looked at him but there was no arrogance or mockery in his eyes. He hadn't understood, you see. He was too young to understand that he had everything, that I had nothing but money. "Don't you envy me," I said in a silly husky voice. "And don't you stay behind that desk too long. And if there's anything you want to do, lad, you do it now. *Now*." I walked out. After that, everything was spoiled, of course—just an absurd old man pottering around the town buying bush-shirts and jungle-boots . . .' Kreb gripped Sloan's knee. He said urgently: 'Is that what I'm really doing, Mr Sloan? Trying to buy myself a boy's adventure . . .?'

Sloan said: 'I just read the last part of the bulletin.'

'You like it?'

'No.'

Kreb shook his head sadly. 'Not good?'

'I'll read it to you.'

Pitt turned. There had been a change in Sloan. He had sensed it immediately; an abrupt withdrawal of sympathy from Kreb. The tranquillity left him and he became aware of a deep anger developing in the man beside him. He listened to Sloan's voice reading, a voice from which the warmth had gone . . . "and we came from the draw and there they were lying up in the shade of a bamboo thicket, two big, orange, rangy-looking cheetahs. They looked peaceful and contented and I told our hunter that I did not wish to harm them and that I would be content with a film. But Mr Quinn told me that we would never get such a chance again and that they were very rare. At that moment the animals left the thicket and started off across the grass at an angle to us, slow at first, then breaking into a fast loping run. Mr Quinn brought one of them down with a long shot and the other vanished into some thick bush. When we reached the stricken creature it was still alive. It had been shot under the tail, the bullet travelling up through the body and into the lungs (I could tell this from the bright red bubbling blood issuing from the mouth). I felt rather sick when the courageous beast tried to raise itself. Mr Quinn said he would have to despatch it but that he would not spoil the skin with a shot. He thereupon broke its neck with a blow of the rifle-butt . . ."

Sloan placed the bulletin on the table, held it pinioned with the weight of his fist. They were silent and they heard the sound of Mrs Kreb's heavy breathing, the splutter of bacon. Pitt watched them; the woman's unconcern, the wariness in Quinn's eyes, Kreb's slack lips pursing into shame. For some reason he could not look at Sloan's face. He could sense the pressure of anger in the big body; contained in a shell of absolute stillness. Ellis scratched uneasily, stared at Sloan, then sat unmoving.

Sloan said to Kreb: 'Is this true?'

'I guess so.'

'Is there a pen in that case?'

'Yes.'

'Then find it.'

Kreb rummaged in the portmanteau, the hands tremulous in its contents. He produced a fountain-pen.

Sloan said: 'Now write exactly as I say—just there—at the end of the last paragraph. Ready?'

'Yes.'

'Write this: I certify this to be a true account of the incident herein described . . .'

'Now see here, Sloan,' Quinn said.

'Shut up. I'll deal with you in a moment. Have you written that, Mr Krebs?'

'Yes.'

'Now date it and sign it.'

Kreb's hand moved unsteadily across his signature.

'Will you witness that, Pitt?'

'Surely.'

'Name and rank.'

Pitt witnessed it.

'Good.' Sloan ripped off the last page of the bulletin, folded it, tucked it into the rear pocket of his shorts.

'That's my bulletin,' Kreb said. 'The only copy I have.'

'You can do another.'

'I want that page, Mr Sloan.'

Sloan stood. Mrs Kreb began to fan herself with the remaining pages of the bulletin. 'What is all this, dear?'

'Now show me the skin,' Sloan said.

Quinn led them to the first truck, opened it from the rear. 'In here.' He jerked the skin from under a covering of gunny, spread it in sunlight.

Sloan bent to it, smoothed it with a gentle movement of the hand. They had come to the Mirembé Steppe two years back, a male and female hunting the plain down to the fringe of the acacia savanna. He remembered noting them in his report and the pleasure in Craven's face. 'I'll come down with you next time,' Craven said in that voice which even then betrayed the pain that seemed to charge the body with fleeting currents. 'We'll have to look after them, you know . . .' After that he had watched for them and he had seen their strange, thin-haunched shapes stand in alert friezes on the brows of hills, the spotted coats flicker in underbrush or flow from cover into brief bursts of miraculous pace, sometimes the two heads deep in the belly of the kill and the gaunt shoulders ruffed high behind the horns that protruded from the meal like a spread black fork. He had loved them because they were hunters and they were built for nothing else, because they were clean and dedicated and passionless in the pursuit and the kill, because they contributed to a pattern of ineffable beauty. Then, after a long period in which he had not seen them, he had found the female ensnared in a spinney

below the hills. The wire of the snare had cut deep into the thick loose flesh at the base of the neck and she was in an extremity of exhaustion. She had snapped weakly at his hands and had then lain passively while he felt for the wire with his cutters. He severed it and pus from the infected wound ran against his fingers. Even then the scavengers were waiting for her and he had stood above her prostrate form, undecided. Finally he went down into the plain, shot a duiker and brought it back to her. The eyes were glazed and he cut meat from the hindquarters, holding the bloody strips against her mouth and nose so that the smell should arouse her. She had seemed moribund, beyond food or drink or movement. Then the jaws opened and the tongue explored the meat and tears of pleasure came to his eyes. He had gone from her, then, leaving meat and water, and he had returned on each of the next two days and on the third day there was nothing but the crushed bed of grass where she had lain and the miniature horns and hooves of the duiker. He circled the steppe in the month that followed, searching, always searching; but there was no sign of them. Then, north of the steppe in the salt-licks, he had found their spoor, recognising it because the unretractable claws had cut long marks above the pugs. It had brought him a moment of deep and simple happiness, reawakened whenever he saw that pair of mottled bodies shift in underbrush or cross the skyline or, more rarely, quarter the plain on the stalk in a harmony of related movement.

He touched the area above the shoulders, feeling with his fingertips for the cicatrice left by the snare. It was there; a rough weal ridged in an uneven line under the hair. He allowed his hand to follow through to the chaps, the strong white whiskers springing erect and the fingers remembering the living warmth and texture of the muzzle. He could not reconcile this graceless thing, this coloured mat and its serrated edges with the hunter he had seen emerge and cross the vision in sudden phrases of perfection.

'I knew it was wrong,' Mrs Kreb said nervously. 'I just *knew* it.'

Crouched, he could see the details of Quinn's fat knees, the rubbed bristles of hair like dirt embedded in the flesh. The legs thrust downward as if consciously braced against the weight of the body. He could not take his eyes from them, the calves swelling in thick woollen socks and the black hair wisped in places through the wool. The anger possessed him, flowing now in pulses of invitation to his muscles, urging him to leap across the skin at Quinn's naked throat, tear at it. He felt his fingers flex, the calf-muscles tighten and the slight shift forward of his body. Then a hand touched his

shoulder and he looked up and he saw that it was Pitt's and he was grateful for this communication, the sympathy in the boy's quiet face. He stood and the effort of control caused him to shake and he felt that he would vomit this knot of misery and wrath. He said: 'She was one of a pair. There aren't many of them left. In twelve months we've seen only seven. Seven cheetah in the whole of the Reserve.' He was speaking, now, without real purpose; seeking composure through the sound of speech. 'She was a lovely girl . . . Quite young . . .' He touched the skin with his foot. 'There was no family as far as we know. Perhaps if we'd left them alone . . .'

'I'm sorry, Mr Sloan,' Kreb said. The oily face puckered in distress. 'Truly sorry. But it happened so quickly. We didn't ask Mr Quinn to shoot it. All we wanted was a film. That's the truth.'

'The truth,' Mrs Kreb repeated.

'Just a film . . .'

Sloan folded the skin, draped it over his arm.

'What do you intend doing with my bulletin?'

'Evidence.'

'Evidence? You mean you're going to make a thing out of this?'

'Yes.'

'But I didn't shoot it.'

'You concealed it.'

'Look,' Kreb said. 'I told you how it happened. I wanted a picture. I hadn't even a rifle. Quinn pulled the trigger—and it's his responsibility. Of course, once the animal was dead I saw no reason why I shouldn't have a nice skin . . .' The voice was petulant. 'I'm telling you the truth.'

'Did you recognise these animals as cheetah?'

'Sure.'

'Did they molest you in any way?'

'No.'

'Do you know what a proscribed skin is?'

'No.'

'Or a Government trophy?'

'No.'

'Now answer this. Did you know cheetah are immune from hunting?'

'Not at the time.'

'But you know this now?'

'Sure. Quinn told us.'

'Did he tell you that you were in unlawful possession of a skin?'

Kreb fidgeted.

'Answer me.'

'I admit we hid it.'

'You weren't going to report it?'

'I guess not.'

'Now tell me this. Did you know cheetah were declared Royal Game three months ago?'

Kreb seemed startled. 'No, I didn't know that.'

'But *you* knew it, Quinn?'

'Yes.'

'Mr Sloan,' Kreb said, 'we're only tourists. We don't know the game laws. We're employing a professional—and it's costing us a lot of money. Aren't we entitled to guidance?'

Quinn said slowly: 'You can't prove we weren't going to report it. We're three days out—and that means we haven't had an opportunity either to report the incident or to deliver the trophy.'

'But you *have* had an opportunity. You could have reported it to me.'

'Well, ain't that what we did? In a way that's exactly what we did. Mr Kreb showed you the bulletin. He didn't conceal it. He let you read it . . .'

'Ah, come off it, Quinn,' Kreb said. 'Words don't help.' He stroked the skin. 'And they won't bring this poor pretty thing back to life.'

Sloan said: 'Have you any excuses, Quinn?'

'Self-defence,' Ellis said with sarcasm. 'It was coming backwards at him so he shot it under the tail.'

'I'll put something under *your* tail if you don't shut up,' Quinn said.

'Any excuses?' Sloan repeated.

'Well,' Quinn said carefully. 'I suppose it was a kind of quick reaction, a spontaneous reaction. I flushed it and it was away and I shot it. Just like that. Without thinking.'

'Do we have to keep on about it?' Kreb asked wearily. 'On and on and on about it in this heat . . .'

'Come and sit in the shade, dear.'

'I'm coming,' Kreb said. 'But first I'd like to know where I stand.'

'I've no charges to make against you personally.'

'Well, that's good to hear . . .'

Sloan stared at Quinn. 'This is the man I'm after. And I'm going to break him—just as surely as he broke this cheetah's neck.'

'Just try it,' Quinn said.

'As far as the offence is concerned,' Sloan said formally, 'there's

a provision for the forfeiture of any game animal, trophy or meat involved and . . . ' he pointed to the stacked rifles and the trucks . . . 'and of any weapon or vehicle used in its commission——'

'You wouldn't dare,' Quinn said.

'I'll take a look round.'

Sloan walked through the gap in the parked trucks. Quinn followed. There were depths of purple shadow, high wet grass. Diffused light lay shed from the trees in luminous shapes, ripe and yellow on one side of Quinn's face. It was a coarse face, Sloan thought; a naked, over-shaven face needing the embellishment of hair. He waited for Quinn to speak.

Quinn asked: 'What are you going to do, Sloan?'

'I'm sending you to the nearest post. They'll escort you to Arupa.'

'And then?'

'You'll be charged.'

'I'll lose my licence.'

'Yes.'

'You'd really do this?'

'Yes.'

'It's my living.'

'You should have thought of that.'

'A man has to live.'

'Why?'

Quinn nodded slowly. 'Yes, I'd expect you to ask that. A Tarzan like you don't care nothing for people. Animals come first—and us poor bastards a bad second. Well, I'll level with you, Sloan. I shot your pet pussy up the arse—I don't deny it. And that gets under your sensitive skin. But your attitude don't seem very logical to me. You say you want to preserve things, keep a natural balance. But I'm part of it too. You can't exclude me. You can't exclude anyone that lives in this country. We all live on each other. And trophies happen to be *my* living. Oh, it's okay for that cheetah to go and tear the throat out of some bloody bushbuck. That's grand. That's *natural*. But when a bloke like me clobbers the cheetah you don't like it. I've got to be hounded, kicked out of the only job I know . . .'

'You finished?'

'These Krebs have had a bad trip. Nothing much to see, game always on the move . . . And they're not really up to the travelling. I *had* to give 'em a decent trophy, something to take back home. You must see that. Besides, they've come a long way. There are schedules to keep, trains and hotel bookings. You can't just turn them back——'

'It's six-forty-five——'

'They'd have dropped me a pretty good tip——'

'—and I have a radio signal at seven.'

'Another thing. This isn't a small outfit. We're just about the biggest in the business . . .' Quinn waved at the trucks. 'This is only a part of it. Commissions from agencies all over the world, lots of cash for the Territory, lots of dollars . . .' Cupidity touched Quinn's eyes. 'You start getting tough with us, Sloan, and the Game Department's not going to thank you.' He gestured to the skin that hung on Sloan's arm. 'Is it all that important to you? One animal among so many? What were its chances? You know about the poaching—they'd have got her.'

Sloan moved away, from shadow into sunlight. The tail swung and he felt it brush against his knees, its limp unliving texture.

'I'm pleading with you, Sloan.'

Sloan stopped. Quinn was behind him. He could hear the breathing, quick and stertorous. This was it, he thought; the point at which a man discards pride and aggressiveness, demands from another some grain of charity. He could feel Quinn's eyes, the intensity of this demand. If he turned, there might be a stranger standing in Quinn's coarse body; someone small and childlike with the capacity for pain and defeat, someone in need of protection.

'Please, Sloan,' the thick voice said.

He struggled for the image he had built and it came again to the surface of his mind; that waxwork of brutality with the stains of blood and cordite on it. It glared like a grotesque and he held it desperately because it was easier to think of Quinn like that. It was clear now, developing in ugly simple contours from a field of slaughtered beasts. Quinn the killer, the worst kind of killer, the killer for money. This was Quinn, the only Quinn. The Quinns were indestructible if they grew flesh and human fears, grew from caricature, became pitiable and held out their hands for compassion. He shot it under the tail, he told himself; tore its entrails and lungs; stripped it and flung it away. It won't run or hunt again and this weight on your arm is all that remains. Remember that.

'Sloan?' the voice asked.

He walked forward, leaving Quinn by the shade trees.

Kreb said anxiously: 'You're going to bust Quinn?'

'Yes.'

'That worries me . . .' The plump hands fluttered. 'It shouldn't—but it does. A man's livelihood . . .'

Sloan reminded Pitt: 'Your signal . . .'

'I'll lay it on.'

'Mr Sloan,' Kreb said. 'I don't know what you have in mind for us but I'm asking you—begging you—not to spoil it. At my age it's an effort even to prepare for a trip like this. We'll never come again, you know.' He searched Sloan's face. 'Look, these are the licences. This one is the camera permit and I'm putting it in my pocket . . .' The hand fumbled . . . 'Like this, see . . .? Now these others are all game permits . . .' The fingers ripped at the papers, doubling them, tearing again until they fell in ragged squares to the ground. 'There—I can't do more than that. We'll have a quiet trip, get some film—and Quinn can just shoot for the pot.' He smiled faintly. 'Won't you—relent?'

Sloan saw the brown eyes flood suddenly; as if the plea had released some fragment of Kreb's boyhood dream and it had raced with urgency through the mind to falter on the tongue . . . won't you relent . . . please, please . . . begun in a book with thick bright pages and tawny beasts and words that were like fruit in the mouth, a boy's rapt face. This was the dream. Kreb was holding out something fragile and beautiful to him, inviting him to destroy or preserve it.

He nodded in agreement and it seemed, momentarily, that he was older than Kreb, heavy with power. He went to the truck, climbed in. Quinn was still standing by the shade trees.

Kreb watched the truck diminish in size, integrate with dust and scrub and the red folds of the steppe. He saw its metal flash once in the sun: then it was gone. A kind of excitement had generated within him. It had come from Sloan, he knew. He could not define it. It had left him restless. Sloan had communicated it to him in the way that some men communicate a fear or an antagonism. He sat at the folding-table, opened his portable typewriter and placed it on the extreme edge where a pool of shadow quivered. He fed paper into it.

'You could move the table,' Mrs Kreb suggested.

'Ah, shut up,' Kreb said affectionately. He stared at the paper. Sloan continued to elude him. He typed slowly: *Preliminary notes to bulletin sixty-seven*. An insect with a transparent body like an ampoule of blood crossed the page. If I hit it with a key, he thought, it'll spurt; just spurt. Sloan walked tantalisingly beyond the range of his perceptions. It might come from physical description, he decided; even though it's nothing to do with size or strength or beauty. He wrote: 'A very large man, heavy in the shoulder and

the chest; a tall brown burned man who came to us across the clearing with a graceful sway and a fair head which glittered in sunlight . . . He wore no socks and the shirt and pants were old and faded and mended crudely in places. He has allowed his beard to grow, a light-brown beard with gold threads in it which catch the light and give it a sort of decorated look. The eyes are serious but there are crows-feet at the outer corners which deepen and run like a tiny network of rivers towards the ears when he smiles . . . ' But this isn't Sloan, he thought. This is merely some powerful, rather beautiful creature who hates clothes, who looks incongruous in the Land Rover, who . . . He tapped irritably on the keys and the name Sloan appeared twice on the page. Sloan, he whispered, Sloan. But nothing came; the name not evocative of anything but a statuesque figure with a golden beard and muscular calves. He wrote carefully: 'He sat very still, looking across the bush into infinite distance with a kind of imperious look, a lift of the head, a sort of *pride*—as if the land were his and we (even the blacks) were intruders . . . one felt uneasy . . . this was no Government servant with a bungalow and books and Scotch whisky, murmuring with European tittle-tattle . . . one cannot fit him into any kind of human community at all—only this community of birds and wild creatures . . . ' Was that it? he wondered. Did Sloan *stay* out here, roam at will, sleep under trees and rocks, protect the animals, return at intervals for ammunition and fuel, disappear again . . . ? He smiled. That was fanciful. And yet it fitted. It was a key to Sloan. Sloan was wild: quiet, gentle, courteous, cast in beauty, yet wild. That cheetah-skin, he remembered; there had been a moment . . .

Kreb watched the insect cross the sharp edge of shadow to white glare; the sheaf of blood that was its body glowed immediately, vermilion. He wrote: 'He remained on his hams, staring at the skin as if he could not believe it, could not accept its death. Then the head raised and I saw him stare across the skin directly at Quinn's legs. The body tensed and I thought he would spring, yes, *spring*; not to strike or knock Quinn down; but to rend. One moved away, as if some terrible anger was about to manifest itself . . . '

Kreb felt confused. Sloan wasn't vicious; merely of a depth which went below their own circuits of behaviour. Those eyes, those serious eyes . . . There were shadows—the shadows one sees in the eyes of men aware of creeping pain. That was it, he decided. Sloan was on the defensive, searching, waiting, at the heart of an enormous threat. He typed the first three letters of Sloan's name, idly. The insect scuttled from the top of the paper, stopped, explored with

its antennae, moved to the place where the key would strike. He hit the key and blood leapt across the incomplete name. He stared and his mind flew immediately to that plane where portents and omens held sway over reason. Silly, he told himself; silly. A small illogical fear had touched him. He had felt it distinctly. He wanted to move into full sunlight. A shadow crossed him and he looked up into Quinn's face.

'You and your bloody typewriter,' Quinn said.

2

THEY HAD CROSSED THE ESCARPMENT to rejoin Vanrennan, Haggard and Maclaren, taking the trucks along the periphery of the half circle which Sloan had hatched in on the ordnance map. Within this loop the migrations moved to the lake. There were four mobile anti-poaching teams in the field, operating in sectors over the whole of Mirembé—that system of reserves, controlled areas and sanctuaries devised and administered by Craven. Contiguous with this was the campaign in the coastal belts of Port of Kuru and the delta behind. Sloan had been given the Mirembé Steppe north to the Fly Gate; the West Lake Reserve; and a section of the escarpment falling to the flood-plain at the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge. These areas he had sub-divided between the two trucks. 'Only one of the trucks is equipped with radio,' he explained. 'So we have to meet daily at predetermined rendezvous. I'll take Athumani and you, Johnny, can have Jeru.' He stared at Haggard. 'I'll ask you to keep a detailed log, Inspector. I want a complete record—including all evidence of poaching whether or not you make arrests; the movements and concentrations of game; land and river conditions; tribes . . . We can't have too much information. Johnny will put you right on the technical stuff . . . ' Haggard nodded, the face animating at the prospect of so much documentation.

Sloan tapped the map. 'There are three permanent posts along this line. Each of them interlinked and having at least three scouts. We have to keep mobile and that means we can't carry poachers and confiscated gear. The posts will give us all the support we need—and they'll take delivery of the arrests. You'll have to keep regular radio contact, Pitt. The scheme stands or falls on communication . . . ' He drew his index finger in a slow zig-zag across

the shading. 'The spotter 'plane will quarter our section like this—and again like this. That way it'll cover the whole strategic area. We act on the signals immediately. Is everyone very clear about this?'

Johnny Maclaren smiled. He had followed the movements of Sloan's finger, staring at the map beneath it until the contours of Mirembe blurred and lost identity, reformed into the terrains of the Burmese upland. It was the same finger, the same broad, rather spatulate nail; it moved with the same deliberation. They had been linked, then, by a sense of danger, of desperate circumstance; but the map seemed remote from their situation. These red and brown whorls bore no relation to the hills and forests that surrounded them, this long black thread no point of resemblance to the throb of the Irrawaddy. He had looked behind him, he remembered, to where the river gleamed, to the underbrush along its banks quivering with luminous reflections, then to the platoon and to Sloan's face (beardless then), to the finger again. The voice had left its slow explanation to develop in their tired minds; silent now. They heard the river. Then Sloan said: 'Is everyone very clear about this?' That was where it fused; the same question to echo from the war, coming distantly from that day of peril where youth had expended itself, uniting them in a moment of recognition. He nodded and he said, as he had said then: 'Sure, Harry. Bright and clear.' He saw Sloan smile and he knew that the phrase had completed it. Sloan remembered. Sloan understood the special nature of the bond.

During those days on the steppe Pitt felt himself enter upon another dimension. Time was measured by the arc of the sun, the onset of darkness, the emptiness of the belly; space defined by vague aspects of bush and mountain which did not contain but parted to reveal new horizons. Even the wind brought the reach of distance; it came as an element of the wilderness, a tangible thing which had gathered the essence of plant, rock and living creature, left it on the lips like the flavour of herbs. He was disturbed by this. He was on the surface of something unstill, some quality of movement which he had not known before. At night the feeling intensified. It was as if the thrust and life of a ship lay beneath him; he would open his eyes and masts might sway across the sky. On the third night at the hour before dawn he had raised himself and stared across the humped blankets and the shapes of trucks to where the sky paled. The wind was cold and he caught his blanket to his throat and he felt the movement again, this sense of the world turning on its axis, enormous weight

throwing gusts of air across him. He had felt confused, unbalanced by this motion: then the confusion vanished and clarity came in the coldness of the wind and he knew that this was freedom, the true, the urgent pulse of freedom. It had come to him, to him alone, at a point in time when it was his to hold or release, to nourish and keep alive—or abandon for ever. He felt some integral part of him close jealously around it. It was in his keeping now: he would hold it, hold it, hold it for the rest of his days. He saw Sloan stir in sleep. Sloan, too, must have recognised it once, caught its fragile substance in his hands like one of those silky spores that float weightlessly downwind. Sloan knew the value of silence and space and timeless rhythms, living in a rare kind of freedom and keeping it intact within himself. There was something unassailable in Sloan. Sloan would not compromise or surrender any part of that which he valued; he would defend, preserve because he had been cast and bred for that role.

He saw Sloan's head move again, turn in sleep toward him. Under that pallid sky the beard was grey, the flesh no longer flushed with the vigour of the man in the prime of living. The way it will be, Pitt thought; the hair and features greyed by time. He felt an immediate stab of doubt—as if something in him, some prescient area of the mind had rejected this image of Sloan in age. He whispered: 'But it can't be like that. Never like that . . .' Sloan, in common with other splendid things of power that roamed in wildernesses, could not survive except in strength. Sloan must pay the inevitable price. Price. Why should he think of it in that way? Should a man pay a penalty for walking in freedom, for setting his face toward lonely suns and clean winds and the cycles of simple creatures? And what, or who, would exact it? The wilderness? Or other men?

He stared beyond Sloan to the sleeping figures, to Haggard's absurd tent triangled in isolation between the trucks. They resented Sloan: he had known it at once and it had lain, this knowledge, like a small undiagnosed pain. But now it was clear. They had come to help him in this war against poaching, come for their own several motives. But, at foot, they resented him; the resentment springing from distrust and the distrust grown on the awareness that he was not of their clay. Haggard made no attempt to disguise it, remaining unapproachable. He had brought with him the stale air of police-posts and worm-eaten papers, standing apart from all of them—but further in distance from Sloan. Sloan, in his free and lissome grace, his contempt for rules, his aloneness, his shabby clothes, concentrated all that was anathema to Haggard. That first night, Pitt

remembered. Haggard had bade them good night, going stiffly to his tent like a guest retiring to an hotel bedroom. He had lighted a pressure-lamp and the tent had bloomed suddenly in green outline against the darkness. They had seen his half-crouched shape in grotesque silhouette, the action of the hands precise even in distortion. They watched, united in pleasure at this invasion of Haggard's privacy; seeing the shorts fall to the ankles and the arms reach down to remove them and the body straighten again and the hands work at the shorts in quick fastidious movements like a woman arranging a garment. Then the figure bent and one of the arms reached and the hands held a thin straight object, applying it, then, to the shorts. 'What's he doing?' Vanrennan asked. The hands began to pat, smooth, adjust. Maclaren laughed. 'It's a hand-press. A bloody hand-press. . . .' Vanrennan said slowly: 'Well, I never seen nothing like that before.' Then, shouting: 'Hey, Inspector, you want for me to put a crease in your bum?' The lamp extinguished.

Pitt saw the sky lighten in the east and the basalt on the flanks of the gorge turn blue-lipped, grow to definition. Ellis stirred, moaned in sleep. The plump face was greasy, sallow with stubble. This one resented Sloan for different reasons, Pitt decided. He was afraid; afraid of failure and of wild places where he could not gain the protection essential to him, afraid because he could smell something bloody and untamed in the air, in the soil of the land he farmed. And that anxious face—like that of a child aware suddenly of forces he had not known to exist; the instinctive backward look and the straining of the eyes at darkness as if something elemental was about to become embodied, menace him from behind. Pitt smiled, remembering that first bivouac when Sloan had come from the wadis to stand on the red edge of firelight, watching. He had flinched from wood-smoke, turned; the figure seemed to materialise from a trough of blackness and he remained crouching, can in hand. Ellis had seen, or sensed, this intensity of concentration and the head pivoted again in the familiar gesture and . . . Pitt laughed softly. This time there really had been something and Ellis must have stared for a second in appalled recognition; not in recognition of Sloan the Warden, Sloan the man, Sloan the leader of their team: but a being identifiably primitive, a night-comer from a savage land in whose terrains it had walked in perfect harmony. This was the beginning of resentment, the seed from which it would grow.

He had slept again, briefly, awakening to find Sloan gone and the Suru blanket folded where he had lain. He had left the bivouac, Pitt knew, for some spring or rivulet of natural water where he

could wash alone and in silence; as if there were something ritualistic in this act of early cleansing. He stared at the blanket. Part of the tribal pattern was taking colour from the sun, crude daubs of red and yellow enlivening as if ochre spilled slowly across it. There was a sense of loss. It came directly from the blanket and the empty sleeping mat. Sloan had gone. He had been there in the half-light and the lips had moved in sleep and he had heard the faint breathing and he could have reached out, touched him. But he had slept, awakened, turned his head—and Sloan was gone. A walk to the creeks, he told himself; a wash and a pipe and back again: this is all. Why should his absence affect me? He felt unease, knowing intuitively that Sloan would retreat from human affection; even from love. These were trammels.

This, the fourth day, would shape its own events. Now, in that flood of early light, it seemed to Pitt that the incidents of the days before came suddenly into focus. He saw them clearly, disentangled from heat and the taste of dust; a progression of death, brutality and indifference which, transposed to scattered red asterisks on Sloan's ordnance map, yet seemed to produce a pattern which led inexorably to the mouth of the gorge. It had begun in frustration, that first signal sending them through rough miombo country to the boundary of the Yuki Stream Reserve; to where the smoke of fires leaned in pillars on the sky. There had been small thin men working earnestly at the trunks of dead trees; flame and choking smoke. 'Honey-hunters,' Sloan said. 'That's all. Just honey-hunters.' He pointed to the crackling underbrush. 'But now we have to put out their bloody fires . . .' The flames crossed in swift tides, colourless in sun, leaping on the crests of ground-winds: they had beaten, dug and chopped in an attempt to confine it, retreating until it expended itself on the grass strips which had been cleared as permanent fire-breaks across that sector of the reserve. 'A lot of good grazing gone,' Sloan said tiredly. 'And time lost we can't afford.'

They left the Yuki, crossing, then, at a diagonal to the fall of the escarpment and receiving the second of the signals at noon. There was activity, the spotter reported, at the lower loop of the Stream; a band of crocodile hunters. Sloan turned the truck, retracing tracks through a ferocity of midday heat until the Stream glittered again. 'They get a good price for a croc-skin,' he told Pitt. 'But there's more to it than that. They need soft-skinned animals for bait . . .' He brought the truck on to Pitt's careful bearing and the river opened—a runnel of dirty milk under that heat-white sky—and

they saw mauve limbs in turbid water, arms deft above gates of fishing-net. 'Suru,' Athumani said. Then, with contempt: 'Fish-eaters,' Sloan wheeled the truck again, bringing it on a wide lock until the river lay behind them. 'It's not going to work,' Ellis said nervously. Pitt looked back and the Suru were still pulling at the nets. The scene was ageless; naked men plucking food from antique rivers. 'The nets are nylon,' Sloan told him. 'Spoils it, don't it?' Then: 'I suppose fishermen might resemble poachers from the air. . .'

They stopped for food in the shade of thorn, eating bully from cans and watching Athumani roast maize on a flattened tin, the maize splitting and its yeasty scent rising in their nostrils. Sloan was silent. Later, they doused the fires, moved deeper into the plain. The spotter crossed the sky, distantly: a small burnished object dipping from sight like an expiring spark.

The third signal turned them toward the scrub that fell in belts to the fringe of the lake. Sloan calculated that they would meet the migrations; and, soon, they saw those dark processions curved on the plain to where the lake bloomed in an immense oval of pellucid light. It hung like a pearl. Sloan said: 'They breed and pasture as they go. It's always like this. Great herds converging on the lake—as if it awakens something in them at certain times of the year, something to which they have to respond: a kind of deep inbred want that grows until it becomes as strong as thirst or hunger . . .' Pitt looked at him and the light from the lake seemed to lie in his skin. For a moment it looked transparent. 'Do you really believe that?' Ellis asked. The voice was faintly cynical. 'Yes,' Sloan said seriously. 'I believe it.' Caution prevented him from revealing too much, from delivering his personal vision to Ellis's urbanised mind. I believe it, he told himself, because I, too, feel this thing within me; the gorge, the valley and the river pulling—as if I had been conceived and formed there, the cord of life still connected. I could tell Pitt, he decided. This boy would understand: that animals and men share a common root, a yearning for return. He said expressionlessly: 'Some say that the herds merely follow the pasture, that the migrations are simply a pattern of the growth of certain grasses . . .'

In this scrubland, this park of undulations and isolated trees and yellowing brush, they intercepted a party of Moran; lissome men who had come deep into the Territory in search of heavy-maned lion. Pitt watched them in conversation with Sloan. The voices were grave and slow, varied in pitch with a sense of careful grammar. There was no anger in Sloan's face and Pitt saw a twist of black tobacco pass to the hand of the leader. Sloan turned them and,

soon, they were small with distance. 'The manes are needed for ceremonial head-dresses,' Sloan explained. 'They've come a long way and they've had no luck.'

'What did you tell them?' Pitt asked.

'The truth—that they won't find the kind of animal they want in this area. They'll go back to the Narok—a hell of a way . . .'

Ellis said irritably: 'I don't understand you, Harry. They're poachers, aren't they? They've entered a Reserve—and they're carrying weapons. Why not arrest them?'

Sloan shrugged.

'And those honey-hunters. It's an offence to cause a fire in a Reserve, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'You let them go.'

'That's right.'

Ellis shook his head. 'But it isn't right. You know it isn't right. After all, we've come a long way, left our work . . . We're not pros. like you. You're the boss and you make the decisions. But when we *do* catch up with these birds we're entitled to see them arrested.'

Pitt saw the face tighten into petulance. The face of a child, he thought; sullen because there is something beyond its reach, its understanding.

'I'll make my position clear,' Sloan said. 'I will not waste time on trivialities, on the odd party that's seeking a skin for the back or a meal for the belly. These are offences. And at any other time I'd deal with them. But on this particular trip it's the commercials we're after. They're out in force and sooner or later we'll find them . . .'

Rocking through the scrub toward that pearl of light Pitt knew that Sloan had evaded Ellis, that Ellis realised this and sat now in a cast of passive resentment. It was a kind of insult, Pitt thought; to refuse the truth to a man because he was unfit for its custody. There had been a moment when Sloan and the leader of the Moran had seemed alike; the same gestures and the same pride of bearing, the same gravity: as if they had been discussing the manes of lions and not the commission of an offence. He had felt their affinity and it left him curiously isolate. Sloan had moved away from him again to an esoteric world where fetishes and rituals and the mystique of the hunt had immense importance; *his* world. Sloan would not arrest the hunters of honey and the hunters of lion. Sloan would not inhibit or destroy or lay axe to any of the roots of this ancient land.

They reached the Lake Reserve in the mid-afternoon, joining thick concentrations of game. The smell of water was in the air, an

urgency communicated from the quickening herds. For the first time Pitt felt the existence of water as an element of life. They were contained within its reflection; it possessed the mind like a forgotten need and they were at one with this tide of migrant antelope, moving, moving, a component of its purposive flow, moving through wild olive heavy with pigeon, to the papyrus: to water. 'It's really a big salt-pan,' Sloan said. The shores were black with watering beasts. He took the truck along the shelves where the ground was hard. 'You see our reflection . . .' Pitt looked and an enormous truck-boat skimmed the surface. 'It's a kind of mirage, the sun and the salt using the lake as a magnifying-glass.'

It was here, in the Lake Reserve, that Pitt saw the organised killings. Until then there had been no real sense of mission. The killing was something remote from him; statistics appearing in Game Department reports and the pamphlets of preservation societies; an issue which provided a focus for Europeans in whom passionate belief flared too easily. It was a country of passions: brief and febrile enthusiasms which ranged from the destruction of fauna to the future of the nomads, to agrarian rights and the redistribution of land under the blight of independence, back again to poaching. He had learned to avoid, to retreat even from these edges of fanatical feeling. It had all seemed vaguely suspect, lacking purity of motive: everything too complex, too interrelated, too sentimentalised. Animals were killed; for meat, for hides, for trophies, for pleasure, for expedience. Pity seemed a spurious emotion in this unpitiful land. One smelled its blood-soaked history: the past came, unmellowed by time, in tones of violence.

At the heart of things was a natural order; a division of life into the eaters and the eaten. Even the hides in Quinn's truck had seemed but a facet of this—with man the final predator. He had felt disgust at the deaths of the lechwe and the cheetah; but the disgust left him almost immediately. Death had lain exhibited: it shocked him as death will always shock the living and he had recoiled. It had attuned him to Sloan and they had shared, for a moment, a common pain. But it had not lasted. There had been a curious process of adjustment. This was a land where life greedily re-created itself: life was life and the conception of beauty was alien to it. There was neither beauty nor ugliness—only life. The land sloughed off the carcasses of the dead even in the moment of destruction and pity or remorse were names for disharmony. The smells of blood and bone were also the smells of fertility. Death became an excitement. He had wondered if this was the true ethos of the hunter; if the act

of killing brought him nearer to the quick of life. He had tried to express this to Sloan but the words would not come and it had sounded like a plea for Quinn. 'There is certainly no end to it,' Sloan agreed. 'Life moves in a circle. Quinn destroyed the cheetah. Soon, I will destroy Quinn. And then——' He left the sentence unfinished and Pitt stared fearfully through the windshield. This wheel of living and dying could spin too close.

That was before he saw the fence.

It had been built to the line of the lake, a hundred metres from the shore, a mile in length. It crossed the declivity of the land, the gaps in it cut so cunningly to the fall that the herds would penetrate without conscious diversion. Beyond were the snares and the system of game pits, trampled earth, the scattered remains of beasts. Mosquitoes seethed, lethargic with blood. There were no men; only this debris of bone and entrail, this evidence of massacre that scarified the mind, brought nausea to the stomach. The herds, turned by the smell of death, had split like an inverted arrowhead, moved passively beyond the limits of the fence. The snares had been set for another harvest and Sloan issued them with wire-cutters. 'Don't waste time collecting snares,' he said. 'Just cut them so they can't be used again.'

He had walked the fence with Sloan and Ellis, snipping at those blood-wet wire nooses. Once, something spread beneath his boot and he raised it to expose a blue coil of intestine and he stood staring at the sky until the impulse to vomit left him. Further, he saw the filled womb of some dismembered beast ripped and flung to the thorn. Toward the end of the fence the snares had not been cleared and it was plain that the men had fled at their approach.

He watched the futile struggles. Many of the antelope had strangled. Some jerked in desperation; some lay in mute surrender or in the paralysis of panic or contorted in bizarre postures around the wire.

He smelled their fear and the strength left his hands and he stood impotently while Sloan and Ellis laboured to release them. The taste of sickness came to his mouth and he closed his eyes and it seemed that he stood at the centre of a suffering of which he, too, was a part. It had been a fraud then, he told himself, trembling, an illusion; that first acceptance I made, that compact with the fact of killing . . . a comfort that was false . . . too easy . . . this fetid scene the reality . . . this red and sun-charred land lifting like the corner of a snarling lip to bare its capacity for anguish, for pain, for relentless violence . . . He forced himself to move, passing Sloan's bent

shoulders. He heard Ellis swear . . . 'It's trodden on my bloody foot . . .' the thresh of limbs and Sloan's voice . . . 'Good. She's away . . .' He found an eland ensnared at the muzzle, the flesh raw and the blood striped in rivers to the nose. The animal seemed huge, bigger than he had expected. He hesitated, cutters in hand. The nausea had not left him. The eland raised itself, strained at the wire. More blood ran. He felt confused. If I cut the snare below the head, he reasoned, it will run free but with the jaws secured. He touched the snare at the point of attachment and at that moment the eland strained again and the hide abraded down to the nostrils and it freed itself, a scarf of soft grey skin and part of the nostril hanging then on the empty snare. He saw it bound in frenzy to the lake, wheel, flee to the bush. Sloan said, behind him: 'Don't free them unless I tell you. The legs dislocate quite easily and in those cases I'd rather shoot them.' Then: 'You need not look at the pits.' He said weakly: 'The pits?' 'Yes,' Sloan said. 'There are quite a number in the pits.'

Old hungers were linked to these raw scents of earth and wounds. He had stared down from the lips of fronded holes and the mind circled around thicknesses of primal memory at the centre of which lay buried a knowledge of pits and impaled creatures. These festering waves reached from the spring of beginnings, touched him and drew him backwards. On the surface was Sloan's voice, distant and speaking from another level . . . 'You'll have to get a signal off . . . communal labour to fill the pits . . .' A kite came black from the tree-line, crossed the fence, banked, hovered, plucked an eye, with precision, from an upturned face. He watched its flight, the eye held like a fruit under the hooked bill. The sickness rose. 'Signal?' he said. 'What signal?' Sloan explained patiently: 'A signal to the nearest post. The pits will have to be filled . . .' The kite had gone into a grove of trees, behind long beards of weed; but it was there, somewhere, with its disgusting morsel. 'Do it now,' the voice said. He nodded. Ellis had begun to fire into the pits and the detonations seemed to meet his face with the force of blows.

This was the prelude. Now, within sound of the cataracts in Staedtler's Gorge the three days lay behind yet present like a weight or a burden. He had seen the killings: the snares, the pits, the fires and the nets, the wounds from the muzzle-loaders, the rigors of poison. It was the poison that disturbed him; it possessed some corner of the mind and would not be dislodged. It was redolent of death itself, wholly African, something the land produced from its hidden wells of evil in the outward form of trees. The sap was there and it rose

and ran in the veins of trunk and limb—but it was not the sap of life. The *acocanthera* grew in the shape of olives and they were unremarkable; not even black and twisted like the roots of mangroves. But they were not as other trees. They came like kindred forms of evil—in the guise of innocence. He had seen them and he had known them at once and he had smiled at his own flight of fancy; but behind the smile was the knowledge of old ceremonies, simmering brews of bark and leaves, forest-noises heard again on the edge of perception like the wings of bats. 'You always smiling to yourself,' Vanrennan said sourly. 'I never seen such a boy for smiling to himself.'

'It's the trees,' he said. 'The poison-trees. There's something frightening in them. One seems to know them.'

'There isn't nothing extraordinary about poison-trees,' Vanrennan said. 'The country's full of poison-trees. Up north they even use tephrosia as a windbreak on the coffee farms.'

There was no warmth in the first pale flux of sunlight and the interior of the truck was raw with cold. He sat crouched before the transmitter and he heard Sloan's voice somewhere in the bivouac, Johnny Maclaren's facile laughter. Merriment, he thought, was never far from Maclaren; springing as if from some irrepressible fount. There was a bond between him and Sloan, something of the war, Ellis had told him, which they shared like an old memento and which gave them a special relationship. It was there, easily recognisable; it expressed itself in laughter, in a form of cryptic speech which made words superficial, in silences which lost them in sudden shifts of time. He touched the transmitter, its cold metal surfaces. But Sloan wouldn't want that, he told himself: not that kind of involvement. Sloan was complete within himself, living only in obligation to some deeply personal creed.

Soon, he received the first of the day's signals and he wrote it down, took it to Sloan. There was a poaching party, the message said, of at least four hundred men, and they were moving from the flood-plain into the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge.

THE FLOOD-PLAIN WAS red with alluvial sand and soil washed from the gorge at the time of the rains and built into natural spill-

ways. Wadis ran backward and upward into the gorge. It was a place of debris; flood-wrack flung far into the plain as a testimony to the river's power. Sloan could hear the Suswa, sullen and blurred by echo. It was low and it would reach the lake almost without perceptible motion. It lay in a kind of sleep; lost in the silt of creeks and marshes. The rains were near and, soon, the sound would change, rise in pitch, and the first pulse of life would leap like a charge throughout its length. He loved and respected power, the river's power, this resurgent life of water that grew in the snows of mountains and the bellies of clouds. He could see the gorge, depths of cold blue shadow. There was a feeling of cataclysm. Violence sat, still, in those jags and lichen scars. He listened. Another sound, a new note lay behind the river's murmur.

'It's a 'plane,' Pitt said.

It crossed at an angle to the line of the gorge, lost height behind the hills.

'You saw it?'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'But it wasn't the spotter.'

'Not the spotter?'

'No. This one has a red tail-plane.'

'I didn't catch the markings.'

'It's definitely not the spotter.'

It came again, this time parallel to the length of the gorge, very low and leaving the mouth like a fly released from an opened jaw. They watched it.

'You saw the red fin?'

'Yes.'

'Maybe the Locust Control,' Ellis said.

'It could be,' Sloan said. 'But I doubt it.'

The aircraft circled, flew back down the ravine. They heard the engine throw a sudden fragmentation of noise into the confines of the gorge, the echoes sharp like the striking of metal plates then dissolving into the sound of cataracts. A skein of wild geese left the gorge and the wings left older echoes to beat in quick flat rhythms. Pitt saw their flight stippled in momentary shadow on the bars of the creeks. Then they were gone and there was no sound but Ellis's heavy breathing, the fall of distant water.

Haggard said: 'I want to get this absolutely straight, Sloan. Your proposal is to track this gang through Staedtler's Gorge?'

'That's my decision.'

'Your decision?'

'Yes.'

Haggard shook his head. 'But you can't make a decision like that.'

'No?'

'You haven't the authority.'

Sloan smiled. 'Authority . . .'

'It's a good word, Sloan.'

'In *your* book.'

'In anyone's book.'

'We're wasting time.'

'I'll repeat it. You haven't the authority.'

'Why not?'

'The strategic area is demarcated by Staedtler's Gorge. That's the limit of our sector and we have to keep to it—'

'We don't *have* to keep to anything.'

'I was afraid of this—'

'Afraid of what?'

'This—confusion of authority.'

'For God's sake shut up about authority . . .'

'Like a comic turn,' Vanrennan said.

'We can't possibly go through the gorge,' Haggard insisted. 'It's not in our sector. It's outside our—' He hesitated.

'—terms of reference,' Maclaren said.

Ellis laughed.

'Yes, it's amusing,' Haggard said. 'Very amusing. But how can the scheme succeed if we don't keep to our sectors?'

'This ain't a police precinct,' Vanrennan said. 'It's a bloody great chunk of Africa.'

'That's right,' Sloan said. 'And we have to keep flexible.' He smiled. 'Flexibility—that's a good word too.'

'Words,' Haggard said. The voice was uneven. 'Let's stop throwing words at each other. Let's stay with the facts. This is a joint operation—the Police and the Game Departments. It was conceived as such and the greatest care was used to define the sectors in relation to scout-posts, the terrain—and the other teams in the field. I'd like to remind you, Sloan, that that 'plane up there is a police aircraft . . .' he emphasised it . . . 'a *police* aircraft. My department made it clear at the inception that the services of the Air Wing were not available unless there were the strongest guarantees in regard to the discipline of the teams—'

'Listen to it,' Vanrennan said. 'Like a book—'

'You see,' Haggard said. 'We *know* the Game Department. All its

little idiosyncrasies, its contempt for paper . . . Big, wild, hairy men taking the pay of the Crown but pursuing their own irresponsible vendettas . . .’ The words of disdain seemed to form in his mouth without control. He knew that he stood apart again, that they were staring at him . . . ‘Detribalised whites living nearer and nearer to the bush, every year the hair a little longer, the face a little darker, the eyes a little wilder, wearing European skins like disguises . . . Oh, yes, we know the Game Department . . .’ He stared down at his shorts, at the sharp frontal creases, then directly at Sloan. Sloan was nodding as if in agreement. He realised that he had been speaking to Sloan, to Sloan alone; that Sloan understood this. He said deliberately: ‘You pretend to protect animals but all you seek to protect is your own way of life.’ Uncertainty had come to him and he stared again at the pressed edges of the shorts. They seemed ridiculous.

Sloan pointed to the sky. ‘For your information that’s not a police aircraft——’

‘It’s not——?’

‘We don’t know whose it is but it’s not the spotter.’

The uncertainty developed. He said: ‘I couldn’t see it properly. The sun in my eyes . . .’

Sloan said: ‘I don’t give a tuppenny damn for your sectors and strategic areas. And if I care to use discipline I’ll take it from myself, not from you. And paper. You mentioned paper, contempt for paper. I’ve seen an example of paper, Haggard—your log. What was the phrase? “. . . we encountered several communities of herbivores with their attendant carnivores . . .”’ He waited for Maclaren’s predictable laughter. ‘What sort of bloody jargon is that?’

Haggard flushed. ‘It doesn’t happen to be my phrase.’

‘No?’ Sloan stared at Maclaren. ‘Did *you* tell him to write that, Johnny?’

Maclaren grinned.

‘Did you?’

‘I guess so.’

Haggard said: ‘We were discussing the gorge——’

‘Yes,’ Sloan said. ‘The gorge. We go through the gorge. That’s my decision. I don’t disagree on the general need for a disciplined scheme. But this is an exception. We’ve had a signal—a good one. And we have to act on it. There’s a party of perhaps four hundred men. I’ve had fifteen years as a Warden and I don’t ever remember a party so large. Can you imagine the damage they’ll do? The killing when they reach the valley?’

Haggard said stubbornly: 'But the Suswa Valley doesn't fall within the scheme.'

'I know the Suswa Valley doesn't fall within the scheme. I happened to help draft the scheme. But we can't be rigid about a thing like this. Four hundred men, Haggard. Think of it . . .'

'And the promotion,' Vanrennan said laconically. 'Think of the promotion, Inspector.'

'We can't ignore the signal,' Sloan said. 'And I'll not allow four hundred poachers to run loose in my valley.'

'Your valley?' Haggard asked. 'Your valley?'

Pitt eased his hat, traced with his finger the line cut across the temples by the band. The heat had intensified and the rock spurs at the entrance to the gorge began to waver. The dispute had moved abruptly to another plane, to some area where Sloan was deeply engaged. *My valley*, he had said: he had partly turned as if to conceal his expression. Haggard had sensed it too. It went beyond possessiveness or arrogance. *My valley*: the words were defensive, on the verge of pain.

'Let's go,' Sloan said.

'No,' Haggard said. 'I can't agree to it. This isn't a private jaunt. It's a scheme, an integrated scheme. You said yourself that the scheme stands or falls on communications—and the pattern of communication is related directly to the disposition of the teams.'

'You hear that?' Vanrennan asked. 'That lovely English?'

Sloan said tiredly: 'Patterns of communication, dispositions . . . None of this will catch a single poacher, stop a single animal from being butchered. We're wasting time—'

'There's an obvious solution,' Haggard said. He pointed to the transmitter. 'Mr Pitt has only to contact base and ask permission. A simple request for permission . . .' Confidence returned. Sloan must now reveal himself. 'Obtain permission and I'll agree to it.' He felt relief, wiped his thin wet face. These recurring crises from which he could not extricate himself, which he seemed to create out of his own yearning for authority . . . let Craven or some other invulnerable official decide. He pointed to the transmitter again. 'Mr Pitt . . . ?'

Pitt did not move. He had seen the shadow of relief in Haggard's eyes, understood its origin. Why should you escape like this? he wanted to say. You began it with Sloan: now finish it. The geese returned and he saw the gorge lift to their falling white bodies, absorb them. He listened for the wingbeat and it came like an emanation of height and decaying rock-walls. Then the wings were

still and the wind took the cataracts and he was aware of a sudden absence of sound, so abrupt and tangible a silence that he wanted to break it: it seemed to surround Haggard and hold him there in a terrible isolation, in a yellow glare in which light and soundlessness coalesced. Nothing disturbed this hiatus and they waited and, then, the murmur of the wilderness obtruded again. It released Haggard and he said: 'Will you send that message, Mr Pitt?'

Pitt said nothing. An insect, green like a cricket, climbed his boot. He watched it.

'The message, Mr Pitt . . .'

It began to negotiate the eyeholes, investigating each of them with its antennae. They would be like caverns, he thought: underneath the odour of the waxed leather tongue—

'Mr Pitt—'

He heard the anxiety in the voice. It would flood him now, in the wake of that illusory relief. He looked up, smiled at Haggard, shook his head.

'You mean you can't send it—for some reason?'

For some reason, Pitt thought. Any reason I care to give you; that the RT's unserviceable, that the time is wrong, that HQ can't receive: anything which will enable you to walk away, follow Sloan meekly through the gorge. He stared at Haggard. The face was severe, pallid in the shadow cast by the peak of the cap. Then the face moved and he thought he saw desperation. He said perversely: 'I mean that I won't send it.'

'You refuse?'

'Yes.'

Haggard nodded. 'I see. I see.' There was no anger in the eyes. He looked dejected. The lips parted and it seemed he would speak. Pitt felt an immediate shame. Why did I do that? he asked himself. I could have saved him. It wouldn't have cost anything and he could have gone through the gorge without loss of face. 'I see,' Haggard said again. Then he turned, climbed into the truck and sat rigid in the seat.

'Yule is the name,' the man said. He removed the sun-spectacles and Sloan saw that the eyes were red-rimmed, rheumy at the inner corners from dust and rubbing. He was young, corpulent. A few tendrils of lank hair escaped from the slouch hat to wisp across the ears. He wore a new sparse beard through which pink patches of skin shone. 'Yule—spelt like the Christmas festival.'

'Never mind the Christmas festival. What are you doing here?'

'Doing here?' The small mouth pouted. 'It's a free country, isn't it?'

'Not when I'm around. Just tell me your business.'

'This is Mr Sloan,' Pitt told him. 'The Game Warden.'

'Sloan,' Yule repeated.

'That's right,' Maclaren said. 'Sloan—spelt like the liniment.'

Yule laughed. 'I could do with some. These last six months I reckon I've legged a thousand miles. A Game Warden you say?'

'Yes.'

'You can keep it.' Yule settled the spectacles on the fleshy bridge of his nose. The lenses were large and dark and the face became immediately expressionless. 'I've seen about five million animals—and I've come to the conclusion I like 'em in zoos.'

Sloan nodded. 'That's where we differ. Now, perhaps, you'll tell me who you are and what you're doing here.'

Yule smiled, bowed his head in mockery. 'Robert Yule of the Land Survey Division. And this—' he indicated a slight man with a sharp face which seemed sunken with fatigue, 'is Tommy Seaward.' He squeezed Seaward's bony shoulders. 'He's only a little blighter but he's a bastard for work—an absolute bastard.'

Seaward wiped his palms on his shirt front, shook hands formally.

'Mr Sloan,' Yule explained. 'Of the Game Department.'

Seaward grimaced. 'Ah, animals . . .'

'Tommy don't like animals either,' Yule said. He waved at two olive-painted trucks parked in the shade of an overhang. There were several men, a smell of coffee. A blue-white pennant curled on one of the radiators. Some underwear lay drying in sunlight. 'I'll introduce you to the rest of the team.'

'No time,' Sloan said. 'We have to get through the gorge.' Then: 'Whose is the UNO flag?'

'That's mine,' Seaward said. 'Food and Agricultural.'

'All these lovely handles,' Vanrennan said.

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'We've heard the handles. Now tell us the business—'

'Just a moment,' Yule said. He cocked his head. 'It's the kite again.'

The aircraft flew down the gorge in slow and even flight. It lifted above their heads and Sloan saw the scarlet fin and the name Airmaps Ltd stencilled on the fuselage.

'You see that?' Yule said. 'That's a good pilot, very slow, just on the verge of stalling . . .'

'It's the last run today,' Seaward said. 'He'll be off now.'

They listened and the sound of the engines diminished, died, came faintly again, died.

'Is that your 'plane?' Sloan asked.

'Well, it's not *our* 'plane,' Yule said. 'It's a private outfit. But we employ it.'

'Aerial survey,' Seaward explained.

Yule fingered his chin, stroked the thin perverse growths of beard. He said: 'I started this when I first came out. But it don't seem to grow.' He removed the spectacles again, stared at Sloan's face. 'How do you get it like that? You rub something in it?'

'Lion-fat,' Vanrennan said gravely. 'Night and morning.'

Sloan said: 'I am not here to discuss my beard. Or animals. Or even names spelt like Christmas festivals. I merely want to know the particular business that brings this particular travelling circus to Staedtler's Gorge.'

'I'm surprised you don't know,' Yule said. 'I thought everyone knew about the scheme.'

'The scheme?'

'The hydro-electric scheme.'

'There are so many schemes,' Seaward said. 'Many of them come to nothing. So in practice the Ministry won't publish anything until the preliminary surveys are complete.'

'We've been two years on this job,' Yule said. The spectacles were swinging now between thumb and forefinger. 'That's right—two years. I'm at the end of my first twenty-four month contract.' Enthusiasm touched the sore red eyes. 'Of course, we're only a very small cog in a very large wheel. We have teams all the way up to the source of the Suswa.' He smiled with a kind of pride. 'They reckon the survey alone will cost a million pounds.'

'A million pounds,' Sloan repeated.

'A lot of lolly. But aerial surveys do cost money. I am what you might call an earthbound surveyor.' He pointed to a theodolite. 'That's about fit for a museum now. So much antiquated junk. Photogrammetry's the thing . . .'

'That's a big word,' Vanrennan said. 'If we knew what it meant . . .'

'Photogrammetry? It means taking measurements from photographs. That's what that 'plane was doing. Aerial triangulation. And it's highly technical, I can tell you. Stereoscopic cameras, electronic scanners, the lot. I'll tell you something, Mr Sloan. They'll get this country down on paper; the gorge, the river, the valley, the forests, every rock, log, tree and rapid, every pool and waterway—

and it'll be accurate to an inch . . .' The face seemed to sweat with admiration. 'To an inch.' He wiped the spectacles, replaced them. 'That kind of precision is . . . well, it's beautiful.'

'You see, Mr Sloan,' Seaward said, 'we believe the Suswa Basin can be developed. That's where my Department comes in. We're working very close to the Agricultural Corporation. In the basin alone there's something like eighty thousand square miles of land—land that's potentially fertile, land that needs only a good system of irrigation to bring it into full fertile life. . . .' The tired face smiled, falling suddenly into a pattern of hollows and deep lines. 'You see, I'm an enthusiast too. I love land, rich soil, sun, water. These are elements; created, if you like, to produce, to produce food. Food . . .' The word came from the mouth with reverence. 'Not vistas and panoramas and wild empty landscapes but crops, food for shrinking bellies. There's beauty in that too, don't you see?' He gestured at the heat-white lands. 'Can't you imagine it? Brown and yellow squares of cultivation stretching away into distance, clear water, roads and rail-track and clean hamlets for the peasants and barns stuffed to the doors with produce—'

'And that's only the Basin,' Yule said.

'Yes,' Seaward agreed. 'A part of a great and wonderful scheme.' He hesitated. 'If I'm boring you . . .?'

'No. You're not boring me.'

'Now you take the Suswa. We've seen a lot of the Suswa, eh Bob? We've seen it slow and placid with hardly a kick of life in it; and we've seen it in spate, so turbulent, so destructive that one was appalled at the spectacle of so much power. And that's it, don't you see? It's the main waterway—but wild and violent, unharnessed. All that enormous energy dissipated out there in the flood-plain. Waste—sheer criminal waste. They say they could make it navigable for two hundred miles inland from the Indian Ocean; that with the proper siting of dams they could control it. And do you realise what that would mean . . .?' The sharp cheekbones flushed. 'It'll mean immense electric power for the Territory, a million acres of good rich soil. A million acres. Food coming up like flowers from the stored fertility of an aeon . . .' He smiled nervously. 'I'm a bit flowery myself. But I can't help it. It excites me. I'm like a pot on the boil. It's a life's work compressed into a few short years—a sort of crusade. And it's coming true, Mr Sloan. All of it coming true . . .' He touched Yule's arm. 'Of course, Bob here will tell me if I'm talking utter bilge but they say a high dam in the right place could tame the whole of the river—'

'That's right,' Yule said. He gestured at the gorge. 'How high is it? Six, seven hundred feet perhaps. But not very wide. So what happens? The river plunges through the gorge, a hundred and fifty miles of high water suddenly crushed through a great natural gate, a narrow gate that spews it all out like a tidal-wave into the flood-plain. Y'know, it frightens me just to think of it.'

'And the right place?' Sloan asked. 'Where would that be?'

'Well, obviously, the main site would be right here in Staedtler's Gorge. That'd give you control for one hundred and fifty miles above the dam. And for another fifty into the flood-plain. In addition they reckon on a smaller dam site where the Okui joins the Suswa . . .'

They were alone now. Sloan gripped his arms, lifted him to the spur. He felt the communication of physical strength: it seemed to render him fragile, almost weightless. From the spur he could see the walls of the gorge descend. He was a part of this descent, aligned with the basalt that fell in sharp brown buttresses to the floor of the ravine. There were plants rooted in crevices, held by the roots and poised above these rock perspectives and he stared down at the crowns of the plants and they were moving, moving in wind and below the movement was a depth of blue shadow: he felt the onset of vertigo. He swayed and Sloan said: 'Easy.' Sloan's arm was around his waist, steadying him.

'I'm all right now,' he said. The rock was cold; not a coldness from the absence of sun but a cold imprisoned in the rock since a remote age of ice. It disturbed him. The gorge had released new sensations; responses which he could not recognise or define but which concerned the backward flight of time. He leaned from the lip, stared across the chasm to the opposite face. If the geese come, he thought, the noise of the wings will tear me from the spur . . . he seemed to hear them again, shuddering metal blows, disintegrating echo . . . if they come . . . the geese . . . any bird to glide, poise and fall in space . . . he swayed again and he felt the arm support him, draw him from the lip. His temples were wet with sweat. He said: 'I don't understand. I'm not usually worried by height.'

'It's the angles. You get some unusual angles. And look at the river—the way it reflects light upward so that the rock seems unstill.'

He looked and the river lay brown, slender and faintly phosphorescent in the gutter formed by the gorge. He could see the trucks, small green objects on the screes. Ellis was staring up at them.

He saw Maclaren cross the scree, urinate against a boulder. The head was a daub of red colour.

'It's low now,' Sloan said. 'Fifteen, twenty feet in the middle. No more. But soon . . .' He pointed. 'You see the green stains, the bits of old debris . . . ? There . . . high up on the face. That's the height it reaches. And up there. The tree-trunk wedged in the crevice? That's a juniper, a sixty-foot juniper, and it was flung there like a twig.' He touched Pitt's arm. 'Are you all right now, Alan?'

'Yes.'

'Come.'

He led Pitt from the spur, along the parapets that girdled the wall. The gorge was opening and the parapets climbed upward. There was more sunlight, luminous movements of light and colour, white spits of river-sand which, untrodden, seemed to accent the loneliness of the place. He could smell the rock, odours of cold and decay which came to the nostrils like pollen.

'It's all very old,' Sloan said. They stopped. 'That's a strange word to use, isn't it? Everywhere is old. But, for some reason, one measures time from the coming of men and animals; as if places had no real existence before that.'

'But the river was here.'

'Yes, the river had life. I'm glad you understand that, Alan. Perhaps it was the river that split the hills in that first upheaval when the crust was soft with heat.' Sloan's voice was quiet, but taken by the rock and cast into long murmuring echoes. 'This is a place of beginnings. You have only to stand here alone, without sound or movement, and you can feel it. You can feel *them*. It is like a voice heard very faintly on the wind—gone in the moment of hearing it. It is there but it is so remote, so distant that you cannot retain it. It is a kind of spirit which is kept alive by the river. Look down there . . . You see where the river bends? the caverns high in the rock-wall? and, below, the shale and the boulders where the tree-fern grows? It was there that the river hollowed out a section of the wall, brought it down to leave the caves high and inaccessible . . .' The voice was vibrant now with a quality of reverence. 'In that shale you can find an axe-head or a notched harpoon or perhaps a bone tool. And in one of those caves there is a wall painted with the forms of a fleeing herd. In the early day the sun filters into the throat of the cave and the colours come to life, faded reds and blues, and the herd seems to take fright and gallop into the blackness where the light never reaches . . .' He was moving now along the ledge,

touching the rock as if its contact reassured him. 'Aboriginal man ran and hunted in this gorge. He came because there was water and protection. He took fish from the river and he went down into the valley for meat. He was a hunter and he was also a toolmaker. Can't you see him loping along those pale-yellow sand bars when the river was low? Alone in a land of great animals with only a stone weapon and a hole in the rock for sanctuary? It must have been like an eternal dawn—everything new and untarnished, everything *beginning*. Even he must have known or felt that he was at the centre of creation, that his seed was not that of the beasts . . .' Sloan partly turned and the face was smiling. 'He must have seen himself mirrored in the water of pools. At night he crouched up there, listening to the passage of some giant creature along the bed of the ravine. Now, all that lives in the caves is a colony of rock conies and you can hear them scuttle behind you somewhere in darkness and if you prevent yourself from turning it is possible to imagine . . .' He pointed ahead of him. 'There are the cataracts.'

The river poured sluggishly down a series of low rock staircases, broke and lost impetus against the teeth of reefs. Lianas wavered on the current. Sloan said: 'When it rises the falls are wholly submerged. All you see is a whirlpool and a mess of frond and vine caught on the rocks.' The parapet led upward into the full heat of day. The wall was hot to the fingers. Pitt looked back and the canyon lay smoking in thick purple haze. Sloan climbed rapidly. There were caps of vegetation on the summits. 'Of course,' Sloan said, 'when the river rose he had to move out from the gorge.'

'He?' Pitt asked. He had begun to pant.

'Our aboriginal. The flash-floods are dangerous. I've seen gorge-water rise a hundred feet in ten minutes . . .'

Pitt stopped.

'Fagged?'

'A bit.'

'At nineteen?'

'Yes.'

'I'd like to be nineteen.'

'Vanrennan too.'

'Ren?'

'That's what he said. He'd like to be nineteen.'

Sloan laughed.

'Is he really a fake?'

'A fake?'

'Ellis says so.'

'Each year the river washed two hundred thousand tons of eroded rock out into the flood-plain. Ultimately, the gorge will disappear.'

'Or so they say.'

'Yes. It's difficult to conceive of time in such dimensions. The mind won't take it.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'About Ren?'

'Yes.'

Sloan began to climb again and Pitt followed. He could see sinew flexing in the naked calves. Spittle thickened in his mouth and he spat, watched the globule arc, drop from sight into haze. Above them the gorge rose in long pilasters of orange rock. Everything was vivid. The eye, he thought, could become drunk with colour. He said to Sloan's back: 'Will we see the poachers?'

'Maybe.'

'Will we catch them?'

'Yes.'

He spat again. The gorge was opening wide now, like the lips of a knife-cut drawn apart. The oppressiveness had gone. There was a sense of space and moving air; of a sudden harmony with Sloan grown on this pleasure of straining muscle. He smiled in simple happiness and he felt his youth recharge him like a power from a hidden source. He said: 'This is good.'

'Yes. Good.'

'We do plenty of cliff-climbing.'

'The regiment?'

'Yes.'

'I was in Burma with Johnny.'

'I know.'

'Johnny tell you?'

'Yes.'

'Johnny's all right.'

'Yes. All right.'

'You want a swig?'

'Okay.'

'We'll stop here.'

They drank.

Pitt said: 'I was sorry for Haggard.'

'Why did you do it?'

'He got under my skin. He doesn't—fit. And——'

'And what?'

'They'd have stopped us going through the gorge.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. They'd've stopped us.'

'Why?'

'You don't fit either.'

Sloan smiled. 'Thanks, anyway.'

'But you'd have still gone through?'

'Yes.'

'For the poachers?'

'Why else?'

'Oh, I don't know.' Pitt felt embarrassed. Words were unnecessary. Sloan knew and he knew. Below, the caves lay in haze; at that distance they were small dark holes pitted in the fabric of the canyon wall. He said: 'Can you reach the caves?'

'If you don't mind a climb.'

'Some climb.'

'Yes.'

'I'd like to see it.'

'The one with the paintings?'

'Yes. I'd like very much to see it.'

'I'll lay it on.'

'Is it a secret?'

'The cave?'

'Yes.'

'A kind of secret.'

'I mean—don't they know about the paintings?'

'No.' .

'You needn't have told me.'

'It's wonderful here . . .'

'Yes. Wonderful.'

'But the gorge and the caves are only part of it.'

'Harry . . .'

'Yes?'

'Why are you—sharing this with me?'

Sloan smiled, raised his binoculars and adjusted the focus against the length of the gorge. He said: 'We'll see the valley in a moment.'

They saw the rift-valley. They saw it from the head of Staedtler's Gorge and they stood in silence, watched the light of morning dissolve its mists. Here, on the crags, they heard only the undertone of moving water. There was wind on the crags, wind to stir the hair. Pitt felt the beauty of the valley clutch him. Sloan's phrases came to his mind . . . like an eternal dawn . . . a place of beginnings

... Nothing had changed, he knew: an aura of newness, of innocence, lay like a reflected glow on all the valley, at once drawing the senses away from the contemplation of beauty and steeping them in a tranquillity so deep, so profound that he wanted never to lose it. This was peace, then? The present relinquished to the past? This compulsion to descend the high basaltic walls to where the river and this valley of wooded hills would open to receive him: enfold? He did not speak and he heard Sloan's even breathing, the spittle in the throat. They were in perfect affinity. Sloan, too, was lost to the valley. Sloan had wandered in it, given himself, *chosen*: and in doing so had made his rejection. *My valley*, he had said. This, then, was Sloan's universe. Sloan's faith was bounded by these hills and reaches. He felt something sour stir within him. What have we lost? he asked himself: what have we lost? Sloan's voice said behind him: 'You cannot see the course of the river but it takes its rise in the Onde Mountains. Beyond the fringe of those blue-gum trees and the juniper forests: they are scented like cedars and you can see the claw marks of leopard on their boles. It is like walking in a cloister—the silence and the red columns and this smell of resin which could be incense. The valley is full of game and nothing is afraid of you. It is like this now—and it was always like this. There are no shells on the banks of the river but below in the lake there are living shell-fish which are those of the Jurassic age.' The voice paused. Then it said: 'Words cannot express it, can they? It goes deeper than the beauty of form and colour; and this silence you can feel is louder than any voice. There is something immaculate here; so absolutely pure that you want to strip your clothes and run naked under that glow of light, through the hills and streams. Alan, I believe this is the Garden of Eden. I believe it. I *know* it. This is the place where it began . . .' Pitt felt the grip of Sloan's hand on his arm and he turned . . . 'Not just a figure of speech, Alan. The place where it all began, the fount of everything we have become . . .' He stared at the bearded face. Sloan seemed suddenly vulnerable. He's afraid, Pitt thought, with shock: he's actually afraid. Sloan said urgently: 'They couldn't destroy it, could they? They couldn't really do that?'

'I don't know,' Pitt said. He looked again at the valley, its pristine light. The fear, too, must be shared. 'I don't know. I don't know.'

Part 3

THE INQUIRY

I

THERE WERE VIOLENT LIGHTS in the sky, in the flesh of leaves, everything sharp and faintly green and the cloud banked around and across them. Sloan knew when he came from the admin. wing to the compound that the rain would come this day, that the Ondes were aflow with it, the hills already plump and replete and the plain stirring to receive it. Shadow cut the perimeter of the compound, dark-green even in its depth, and he moved through it, through hot avenues of diffuse light, over to where Pitt leaned against the truck. He saw the face lift to the electric sky, turn under that circle of brooding cumulus, the smile of recognition. The face seemed small and youthful, too gentle for the peaked cap. 'How's the Army?' he said.

'Sticky.'

Sloan nodded. 'It'll come today.' He touched the truck. It was bright and newly-painted with a regimental emblem and a stencilled transport number. But red dust from the Mababe road stained the wheels. 'Nice,' he said.

'Yes.'

'From Brigade Headquarters?'

'Yes. We had a nice drive.'

'We?'

'Me and Lulu.'

'Lulu?'

'You remember.'

'Ah, the African lieutenant . . .'

'Yes.'

A man came from the latrines. He was very tall with wide shoulders, so wide that the epaulettes strained into tautness, and a hipless body and long thin-wristed arms which swung loosely as he walked to give him a lithe and predatory gait. The skin was deep brown, as deep in hue as the leather of his belt, the features small and Arabic. He wore a thin, carefully-scissored moustache. There was a quality of colour about him, something vibrant which came from the flesh and the leather, heightened by the insignia stitched in blue and red patterns to the upper sleeves.

'Kalulu,' Pitt announced. 'Harry Sloan.'

They shook.

'You are as tall as I am,' Kalulu told him.

'But not as black,' Pitt said.

Kalulu relinquished his hand. 'I have heard about you,' he said. Then: 'Do you know your latrine is choked?'

'Is it?'

'There is quite a lake in there.'

'He takes sanitation very seriously,' Pitt said. He touched Kalulu's arm. 'Have you written something appropriate on the wall?'

'You mean—an obscenity?'

'Or an assignation.'

'No,' Kalulu said gravely. 'The walls are of black creosote. It is impossible to write legibly.'

'You could use white chalk.'

'I had none.'

'Shame.'

Kalulu smiled. 'How long should this inquiry take, Mr Sloan?'

'I don't know. Some time, I guess.'

'Is it serious?'

'It could be.'

'I wish you well.'

Pitt said: 'He is acquainted with the valley. Or so he says.'

'It is a good valley,' Kalulu said. 'One has—roots there.'

'How can that be?' Pitt asked offensively. 'Everyone knows your grandmother was an Ituri pygmy.'

Sloan smiled. He measured Kalulu's height with his eyes. 'Then there has been a great deal of evolution.'

'You mustn't mention evolution,' Pitt said. 'Not to Lulu. It becomes embarrassing.'

'Not at all,' Kalulu said. 'It is a matter for pride. Do you know, Mr Sloan, that I am the first Ituri pygmy to attend the Royal Military Academy?'

'Congratulations.'

'He is certainly the blackest lieutenant in East Africa Command,' Pitt said.

'A genuine second-lieutenant,' Kalulu said. 'Not a mere lieutenant-effendi. A genuine hall-marked lieutenant with the Queen's Commission.'

'Were you really there? At the Academy?'

'Yes,' Kalulu stared at the sky. 'Since it is about to rain and the inquiry will obviously be lengthy I am going to buy myself a drink.'

'A good idea,' Pitt said. 'There is a palm-leaf hut on the fringe

of the town where you can obtain a gourd of excellent banana-beer. Just like mother made.'

'I would prefer a sherry.'

'Elliott's Hotel,' Sloan told him.

'That will be all right?'

'Yes. There is a fine bar.'

'I mean—all right for me?'

'It will be quite all right.'

'Thank you,' Kalulu said. Then, seriously: 'I will tell them I am of a little-known European tribe.'

'Or that you have prepared your face for a Commando exercise,' Pitt said.

Kalulu laughed. They watched the lissom body pass through the gateway in the palisade, turn toward the town.

'A good man, that,' Sloan said. 'He has real power.'

'Yes.'

'You are close friends?'

'Yes. Really.'

'And the baiting is without—hurt?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Are you sure?'

Pitt smiled. 'It was awkward at first; in the mess I mean. Everyone leaning over backwards to avoid any kind of reference to it. In the end we got so sensitive we wouldn't even mention a black cat when Lulu was around. Then, one day, the CO—a bloke called Sales—was briefing us on a training operation he'd got in mind. Sales is very keen on schemes; you know—bizarre schemes with impressive code-names, all the usual bull. Anyway, "A" Squadron was to do a practice drop on the outskirts of Port of Kuru at one of the large trading warehouses, place a few dummy charges in the right places—that kind of thing. "You are to assume," Sales said, "that the warehouse contains vital war material. Actually, it is full, I'm told, of imported coco-bean." I remember him screwing up his face. "We'll have to give the op a name," he said. "Something apt." We waited and his face brightened and he said: "I know. We'll call it Operation Chocolate Soldier." There was a silence and then we all turned and looked at Lulu and Sales went red with embarrassment and suddenly Lulu gave one of those long deep laughs of his and we all burst out laughing and Sales put his arm around Lulu and asked him if it wasn't a good name. After that it was all right. Now we call him every kind of black bastard under the sun and we're all very fond of him——' Pitt flushed. 'Silly, isn't it?'

'He's a good man.'

'Awfully good.'

'Should we go in now?'

'Wait,' Sloan said. A convertible with bruised wings and blistered paint had entered the compound. They watched it slow at the veranda as if in hesitation, then half-circle the compound to halt by Pitt's truck. There were three people in the convertible; a man, a woman and a girl. The man and the woman got out and Sloan said: 'Alan, this is Jan and Mary Kleinert. Alan Pitt.'

'Ah, the Army,' Kleinert said. The white-lashed eyes seemed defensive.

Pitt took the proffered hand. 'Don't you like the Army?'

Kleinert smiled. 'I have the greatest respect for the Army . . .' he touched Pitt's sleeve . . . 'especially the Airborne. But not when it gets my girls into trouble.'

'He is a pastor,' Sloan explained. 'Of the Dutch Church. He has grown what is called a moral backbone.'

Mary Kleinert said: 'We saw a wonderful-looking man going down the road. An African officer with big shoulders and a proud northern face. He was singing.'

'That was Lulu.'

'Lulu?'

'Lieutenant Kalulu.'

'And you call him Lulu?'

'Yes.'

She grimaced. 'What a name for a man like that.'

'He *was* rather impressive,' Kleinert said. 'One felt he should wear a coloured robe, carry a spear . . .'

'He would prefer to carry a bottle of sherry,' Pitt said.

'Sherry . . .'

'He has an enormous regard for sherry.' Then: 'We're not actually an airborne regiment.'

Kleinert pointed to the para wings. 'Then what are those?'

'Well, we do a bit of jumping—when necessary.'

'It's all very mysterious.'

'Yes.'

'What do you do when you have jumped?'

'That's a secret,' Sloan said.

Mary Kleinert smiled. 'Why do men have to have secrets?'

'It's not really a secret,' Pitt said. 'You could call it—demolition.'

'Ah, demolition,' Kleinert said. 'Destroying things. They destroy

the bridges and the railways and the airfields—and then they come back and destroy my girls.'

'Did they really do that?' Pitt asked.

Kleinert nodded and the small ugly face tightened into mock severity. 'There were at least two cases—'

'Oh, don't be silly,' the woman said. 'We don't know it was the Army.'

Sloan touched the wing of the convertible. 'You've had another knock.'

Kleinert reddened. 'Yes.'

Sloan pushed the car. He felt it move. 'And you haven't put the brake on.'

'Haven't I?'

'He ought to give it up,' Mary Kleinert said severely. 'He'll never learn to drive.'

'How *can* I give it up?' Kleinert said. 'I can't get around without a car. It's a very big——' He paused.

'A very big what?'

'I was going to say—parish. But that's not quite the word for a slice of rough country like this.' He smiled at Pitt. 'We were the first Mission in Mirembe. The very first. That was nearly thirty years ago. Naturally, the Romans soon followed. And now . . .' he shrugged . . . 'now we have the lot; the Dutch, the Romans, the Salvationists, the Franciscans. Even the Mennonites—whatever that is.'

Sloan nodded. 'We are truly priest-ridden.'

'I am going to propound a law—a new, natural law. And that is that the godlessness of a given area increases in direct ratio to the number of priests per square mile.' Kleinert grinned. 'Do you think that's clever?'

'No.'

'You don't?'

Sloan said gravely: 'Why should God bother to come when there is such an army of his accredited representatives?'

Pitt laughed.

'You know,' Kleinert said seriously, 'there might be a lot of truth in that.'

'Oh, don't be silly,' Mary Kleinert said. 'Why don't you put the brake on the car? Emmy's inside.'

'We're not on a hill, are we?'

'I'll do it,' Sloan said. He reached into the car, applied the hand-brake. He said to the girl: 'How's things, Ginger?'

The girl smiled faintly.

'I see the spots have gone.'

Kleinert said behind him: 'You mustn't tease her, Harry. She is eighteen now and everything is very serious.'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'She is on the fringe of womanhood.'

'My daughter, Emma,' Mary Kleinert said to Pitt. 'A nurse at the Port of Kuru General Hospital.'

Pitt touched his cap in a half-salute. 'Miss Kleinert.'

'That was a sloppy salute,' Sloan said. Then, to the girl: 'He is very fond of nurses. He has been reprimanded fourteen times for offences against nurses.'

'Fifteen,' Pitt corrected.

'Fifteen? You didn't tell me of the fifteenth.'

'The one on Naivissa.'

Sloan told her: 'He has been on Lake Naivissa with an assistant-matron.'

The girl said nothing.

'I'm talking to you, Ginger.'

'Let's be serious,' Kleinert said. The face puckered. 'We heard tell of the inquiry. So we came over.'

'Just to be near you,' Mary Kleinert said anxiously. 'It'll be all right, won't it?'

'I hope so.' Sloan watched them. Their fingers had entwined in that spontaneous act of mutual devotion which had become so familiar to him down the years. The two plain faces seemed to shine with goodness. He felt something contract inside him, an impulse of near-pain which sprang at times from an awareness of his love for them. He said gently: 'It was good of you to come.'

'Well, Harry,' Kleinert said. 'You know where we are if you need us.'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'You have always been there when I needed you.' He saw Kleinert's eyes blur with emotion and he looked away. He hasn't changed, he thought; still the same energetic, capering little man with the high enthusiastic voice. There was even a stain of coloured chalk on the sleeve. He knew that this lack of change had begun to worry him. The pastor, for all his deep well of natural goodness, charity and learning, his capacity for love, had never grown the mask of authority. The sparse red hair and the pliant face with its insipid eyes and pallid skin combined to rob him. He needs dignity, Sloan thought; a priest is nothing without dignity. He said to Pitt: 'We ought to go in.' He saw the entwined fingers tighten and the faces crease in anxiety. 'Why are you so

anxious?' he asked them. 'You know nothing of the affair.'

'No,' Kleinert said. 'But perhaps, when it is over, you will come to us and tell us about it.'

'Perhaps.'

'Come on,' Pitt said.

They moved around the car and Emma Kleinert smiled. Sloan said: 'Say good-bye to the lieutenant, Emmy.'

'Good-bye, lieutenant.'

'They say she is a very efficient nurse, although ginger,' he told Pitt. 'You will know where to go if the parachute refuses.'

Meckiff said: 'I will introduce myself to those of you who do not know me. My name is Meckiff and I am the Superintendent of Police for the Suk District of Port of Kuru. This is not a legal or judicial inquiry. The new Game Warden, Major Freeland, has already made that clear to you but I repeat it. This is not a judicial inquiry and it does not attempt to anticipate or prejudge the Coroner's Inquest to be held on Wednesday next. Certain police investigations have already been made but they are incomplete and, in general, unsatisfactory . . .' He could see his face in the window-pane at the end of the room, a pale smear behind the table at which they sat. Blurred and almost featureless it was still vaguely negroid: he watched it with distaste, the thick lips moving. He spoke and the reflection spoke in unison. It seemed that the formal phrases originated at a point behind their heads, that he himself was mouth-ing silently . . . 'I have called you here to the headquarters of the Miremba Game Reserve with the approval of the Warden and at the suggestion of the Commissioner of Police. The purpose of the inquiry is to throw light on the circumstances surrounding the death of Assistant-Inspector Haggard. Now, informal though these proceedings are I reserve the right to make a detailed record and to this end I have instructed my colleague here, Mr Heenan, to take a shorthand note which will eventually be transcribed—'

'—and which,' Vanrennan said, 'we shall be asked to sign.'

Meckiff shook his head. 'At this stage . . .' he emphasised it . . . 'at this stage no party has been charged with the commission of an offence; not with negligence or with anything of a graver nature . . .' An African ranger had placed himself beyond the window and he saw his own face sharpen and take feature against the backcloth of the man's tunic. The nose was fleshy with wide, flared nostrils, the cheekbones high and prominent. The mouth, he thought, seems thicker when I talk, loose and heavy. He pursed the lips, inclined

the head slightly: the face became recognisably English. He said: 'I want facts, details, impressions. I want to know everything and anything that may have contributed to the death of this officer . . .' He stared at them. 'I cannot pretend to be disinterested. I am deeply involved. I am shocked and resentful. I am in a mood for reprisal. Tom Haggard was an officer in my own department, a man whom I liked and respected. In our calling we learn to accept risk, the possibility of accident or injury or even death: danger is an implied condition of service . . .' He began to tattoo upon the surface of the table, stressing certain syllables with a loud and separate tap of the finger. . . . 'What I *cannot* accept, what the Commissioner cannot accept is the fact of an officer's life thrown wantonly away.' He smiled, without humour. 'That is my position and I make no apology for defining it. I have lost a man—and I intend to know the causes. A secondary purpose of this inquiry will be to glean the facts behind the ill-treatment of Mr Ram Channa . . .' He nodded at the Asian sitting to the left of Pitt: the puggarce, a shimmer of bright green silk in the light of that half-shuttered room, leaned in acknowledgment. 'I have no doubt that Major Freeland will also be interested in the loss to his department of a truck, weapons and expensive radio equipment . . .'

'That is so,' Freeland said in his urbane voice.

'Now,' Meckiff said. The fingers had moved to the breast of his tunic, tracing and retracing the line of stitched medal-ribbon; the colours were dulled from this ingrained habit. 'Now, I think we should follow some sort of procedure. We are informal but that doesn't mean we have to talk each other down. It doesn't mean we have to lose the sequence of events. Let's try to recall words and incidents, dates and times with accuracy. To begin, we'll give Mr Heenan the personal data. Reading from left to right around the table and starting with me. Just the name and description for the moment. Are you ready, Heenan?'

Heenan nodded. He was a corpulent man with a white bald head and side-waves of silver hair which he brushed upward from the ears. One day, he hoped, the hair would meet across the crown, disguise it. 'I've been ready some time.' He gestured at the foolscap pad. It was covered with neat symbols, dimpled in places from contact with his fat damp hands.

'You mean you've got all that down?' Meckiff asked. 'Everything I said?'

'Yes.'

'That's extremely good.'

'Not at all.' The voice was soft, polite. 'That's what I'm paid for.'

'All right,' Meckiff said. 'We'll begin. David Alexander——'

'A moment,' Heenan said. He tore a page from the back of the pad, placed it to the front, numbered it. 'I'll put it there . . .' he pinned the page . . . 'like that, before the—preamble.' The word sounded disdainful. 'Now, Superintendent?'

'David Alexander Meckiff. Superintendent of Police.'

'Yes, I have that.'

'Guy Meredith Freeland. Major. Game Warden.'

' . . . Yes.'

'Harry Robert Sloan. Deputy Game Warden.'

The pen stopped. 'You mean Henry?'

'I mean Harry.'

'It's not a——?'

'No.'

'I see . . .'

'Robert Andrew Ellis. Farmer.'

' . . . Yes.'

'Alan Pitt. Second-Lieutenant, Thirty-Seventh Special Field Service Regiment.'

'Just the one name? The one baptismal name?'

'Yes.'

Heenan nodded. 'Just the one.' Sympathy seemed to touch the soft voice.

'Ram Channa. Merchant.'

'Merchant,' Sloan said in disgust. 'He means poacher. A butchering bloody poacher.'

Ram Channa said: 'I am a dealer in general merchandise.'

'You are a dealer in illegal trophies, meat and hides.'

'Merchant,' Ram Channa said in his high Welsh voice. 'A general merchant.'

Heenan said mildly: 'Merchant I think . . .'

Channa said to Meckiff: 'Is it in order for Mr Sloan to make these allegations? Nothing has yet been proven——'

'I agree,' Meckiff said.

'—and there is also the question of—counter allegations . . .'

The hand touched the left ear significantly. Surgical gauze covered it; the ends of adhesive tape ran upward under the turban. 'I should have brought my solicitor . . .' The voice was petulant. 'I have very good Asian solicitor who is not impressed by European bombast.'

'The next name?' Heenan asked.

'Maclaren. John Duncan Maclaren. Farmer.'

'... Yes.'

'What have you put down?' Channa asked suspiciously. 'How have you described me?'

'Merchant.'

'Oh, my God,' Meckiff said. 'It's really too warm for this kind of thing. And it isn't important. Just an identification for the shorthand-writer ...'

'The next name?'

'Hendrik Vanrennan. Farmer.'

'Will you spell that, please?'

'F-a-r-m-e-r.'

Channa laughed, revealing small white teeth, perfect except for one gold canine which glinted when the lips stretched.

'Spell the name,' Meckiff said coldly.

Vanrennan spelled it.

'I like a joke,' Meckiff said. (He had, in fact, no sense of humour.) 'But only in its place. And this *isn't* the place. This is an extremely serious inquiry—'

'—and quite informal.'

'Yes, Mr Vanrennan. Quite informal.' Meckiff stared. 'I don't care for sarcasm.'

'I have the names,' Heenan said.

'Yes, the names.' Meckiff lifted two thin manilla folders from the table, opened them and riffled the pages. 'There are two documents here ...' He had nearly said 'exhibits'. 'One of them is Mr Sloan's official log. The other is a log kept, I understand, by Inspector Haggard on those occasions when the party divided and which will, eventually, be incorporated with Mr Sloan's in the Game Department record. I have also a batch of radio signals received by Lieutenant Pitt: and a further batch of signals and acknowledgments received by Mirembe Headquarters from Lieutenant Pitt. Now, to begin—'

'Before we begin,' Sloan said, 'I'd like to know if there's any further report on Laurie Craven.'

'Mr Craven is extremely ill,' Meckiff said.

'I know he's extremely ill,' Sloan said. The word 'extremely' had a compulsive fascination for Meckiff, he thought. 'I'm asking if there's a further report.'

'No further report,' Freeland said. 'Not since yesterday. He's in the military hospital at Mababe and they'll move him later to Port of Kuru, probably tonight.'

Ram Channa tapped his wrist-watch. 'The time ...'

'You're not going any place,' Sloan said.

Channa grinned with insolence.

Meckiff said to Freeland: 'I think you ought to begin. Start with the campaign. Just for the record, you understand?' He saw his thick lips smile faintly in the window-pane. 'We'll give Mr Heenan a well-constructed story with a beginning, a middle and——' He hesitated.

'And an ending?' Sloan asked.

Meckiff fingered the medal-ribbons. He could hear a truck revving in the compound and he listened with his head to one side. The noise came in waves, inhibiting thought. He stared through the window and across the veranda to the compound and the palisades and the lowering skies. The light was brittle, the edge of shadow blade-sharp. But the rains were there. He could always tell. It was not merely the evidence of sombre sea-green light lying somewhere behind the veils of morning sun; not the sweat in the loins nor the humidity. It was noise that told him. He became, at these times, hypersensitive to it. It came to his brain in needles of pain. The needles moved in that raw area of the brain until noise was intolerable. The engine mounted to crescendo and he touched his temples.

'I'll tell them to stop it,' Freeland said.

'Please . . .'

Freeland said something to the ranger on the veranda and the man went down into the compound. Meckiff waited. 'I can't stand noise. . . .' Freeland nodded. The noise stopped and the needles pricked once, then retracted. He wiped his forehead. 'The rains . . .' he explained. They were staring at him.

'The wet's not far,' Sloan said.

'Today perhaps . . . ?'

'Yes, today.'

'It'll come today,' Meckiff said with conviction. 'I can feel it.' He felt suddenly disconcerted and he said, unnecessarily, to Heenan: 'Are you really getting all this down?'

'Every fart and cough,' McLaren said.

'Filth,' Ram Channa said with distaste. 'Why is it the British cannot resist the filth?'

'You want some more gold teeth?'

'Drop it,' Meckiff said. The noise had translated into headache. The ranger returned, placed his back to the window. Meckiff saw another face, a bearded face with a plume of tawny hair and calm English features appear adjacent to his own. He stared at it, the

contrast clutching him in a sudden pain. He looked away and Sloan moved also, leaning back from the table. Freeland was speaking: he tried to concentrate on the bland voice . . . 'and coming as I do at a moment's notice from the Trans Kichuru it might be better if Sloan gave us the background . . .'

'Trans Kichuru,' he repeated. The name, mere syllables on the surface of this growing head-pain, had no significance for him.

Sloan's voice said distantly: 'The idea of organised anti-poaching campaigns originated in Kenya. Craven went up to East Tsavo at the invitations of the Wardens and spent some time in the Voi and Kitui Districts, also in Mombasa. The territories were too big and the departments too understaffed for effective patrolling. The scheme was to use police-aircraft for spotting, to centralise the information and to radio it immediately to the teams in the field. That way they'd get on to the gangs as soon as they appeared, perhaps even before they'd done the damage. And it worked. There were spectacular successes, especially on the Coast. Craven was impressed. He returned with an enthusiasm I'd not seen in him before. He was ill, of course, and he'd taken to using a stick. I can see him now, stumping around this room, pausing, describing the campaign and the drill they'd developed, rapping with the stick when he became excited . . . He'd already obtained a promise of co-operation from the Port of Kuru Air Wing. He sat down in that chair where Major Freeland is sitting now and he began to draft a scheme for our own Territory, something ambitious which would bring all the Reserves and Controlled Areas within the scope of one concentrated campaign. You see . . .' he was speaking, now, to Meckiff . . . 'we can never eliminate poaching. The country's too vast, the cover too good, the price of illicit horn and ivory, meat and hides too high. I don't have to tell you this—you know it. But what we can do is to bear down hard on the traffic, keep it within bounds, prevent it from growing into massacre . . .'

Meckiff listened. The voice was quiet, the delivery careful and unemotional. But it had trembled once on Craven's name and there had been a pause. Then the voice resumed. You can learn a lot from voices, he told himself: voices like this which are even and pleasantly modulated, murmuring above a depth of feeling which is never expressed. It was like a chasm in darkness, invisible but touching the senses and causing one to halt. He continued to stare at his hands, at the pad above which Heenan's round white fist floated in perpetual motion. He watched the symbols appear between the faint blue lines. You're clever, he thought; everything to reduce later

into perfect transcript. But it's the unspoken word that counts, the word or the phrase avoided which provides the final significance. The voice said: 'We hadn't realised the extent of the poaching until the first of the campaigns. Some of the areas were—ravaged. It was nothing less than extermination. I remember finding the carcasses of eleven hundred elephant. Think of it—eleven hundred. From some of them, the smaller ones, they had not even bothered to remove the tusks . . .' The tremble again, Meckiff thought: I heard it and it was gone. But I heard it. He looked up into Sloan's face, at the beard moving slightly with speech. It was a comely face, a beautiful face, married to grace and physical strength. He touched his own thick features, let his hands fall to the table. Sloan sat on the edge of the chair, unrelaxed and strangely remote; as if this room of sweating men were alien to him. Meckiff knew suddenly that Sloan found the room, any room, claustrophobic . . . ' . . . but we hadn't the staff to mount really comprehensive campaigns and that meant we had to recruit honorary assistance, settlers, men like Vanrennan here, Johnny Maclaren and Ellis . . .' Meckiff stared through the window to the compound. It was sallow, without purity of light. The sky was olive behind the palisades. A truck-door slammed and he felt the noise leap like an electric charge within his head. Make it come, he said to some vague storm-god of his own imagining: make the rain come—today . . . ' . . . there were four teams and we had divided the Mirembe game areas into roughly equal sectors. Each team was given two trucks, one of them equipped with a radio transmitter; two African rangers were allocated to each team. We moved out at dawn on the sixteenth. The log contains full details of the geographical locations to be covered by the patrols but, to simplify it, one can say that the teams were to move on a course that would converge, eventually, on the lake. It was at the lake and its environs that we expected to meet the greatest concentrations of game and, therefore, of poaching gangs . . .'

Meckiff nodded. Formal words, precise phrases: geographical locations . . . environs. It was like a reading from a printed report—or something carefully prepared and memorised. Sloan would strive to keep it at that level, a mechanical narrative to flow comfortably above the regions of danger. The voice seemed quieter, almost toneless. You're a fanatic, Meckiff decided with sudden insight; the fanaticism latent, perhaps controlled—but there. And it is the spring of Haggard's death. He looked at them, their wooden faces. Like so many waxworks positioned around the table, he thought; not really here at all, the vital parts left somewhere out in the bush. How can I

restore them to those yellow days of heat and effort? To the steppe, the gorge, the valley, to the things that contributed? The waxworks seemed to nod, without expression. They would sit there until they melted into a lethargy of noonday heat, the knowledge and the guilt buried in the gorge with Haggard's body. Only Ram Channa showed traces of animation. The face was sulky beneath the puggaree and the pigmented eyeballs moved continuously. Can I reach them through Channa? he wondered; through his sense of pain and grievance? His hatred of the European?

'All right,' Meckiff said to Sloan. 'We'll start from there—at the point in time when we leave Mirembe HQ at first light. We have two Land Rovers; a Warden; a policeman; three settlers; a signals officer borrowed from the Army——'

'—And two rangers.'

'Yes. Two rangers.'

'Their names?' Heenan asked.

'Athumani. Jeru.'

'Would you like the spelling?' Vanrennan offered.

'No. It's only the peculiar Dutch names that confuse.'

Channa grinned.

Meckiff said: 'There would also be provisions and ammo?'

'Yes.'

'For how long?'

'Perhaps seven days.'

'Only seven?'

'That's about the maximum. One can always shoot for the pot. And it's possible to revictual and get fresh ammo at certain of the posts.'

'Scout posts?'

'Yes.'

'These posts—oughtn't I to have a note of their positions?'

'You have them. On the face of the log They're clearly marked.'

'Seven days you said?'

'Yes.'

'Was there a time limit to the trip?'

'No.'

'None whatever?'

'We were in regular radio contact. The teams could always be recalled. And if the rains broke early we'd naturally return at once.'

'Why?'

'Why? I should've thought it was obvious.'

'You tell me.'

'The roads aren't tarmac, you know. They're motorable in the dry season but when the rains come they're liable to be washed away. And at those times the marsh around the gorge becomes impassable.'

'And the lieutenant?'

'What about him?'

Pitt said: 'I was on indefinite leave of absence.'

'I see.'

Heenan said: 'If we could pause on occasions—so that I can insert the names . . . ?'

'The names?'

'I can get the dialogue all right,' Heenan explained patiently. 'But I like to insert the names of the speakers before I get too far.'

'We need tape-recorders,' Ellis said.

Heenan stroked his silver hair. 'In *our* profession, Mr Ellis, we don't mention tape-recorders.'

'I can well believe it.'

'You actually get all this down?' Vanrennan asked.

'Yes.'

'All of it?'

'Yes.'

'What about now?'

'Now?'

'We're talking, aren't we?'

'I am not supposed to be here . . .'

'But *I'm* here . . .'

Meckiff listened. They'll divert it if they can, he told himself; twist it away so that Haggard's death becomes more and more remote. His head was throbbing. He said irritably: 'Let's cut out the idiotic back-chat, shall we?'

They were silent and he was aware at once of his mistake. He had reminded them of authority, warned them, pushed them back into their shells. He said cordially: 'It's getting hotter. And the sky's dark . . .' No one spoke. Perhaps a confidence? He told them: 'For some reason I always get a rotten head when the wet's about to break. And I can't stand noise.' He heard Heenan's fist move across the paper. He said in temper: 'You don't have to put *that* down, do you?'

'But of course, Superintendent. It's not for me to discriminate.'

'Then drop it.'

'You mean——?'

'Drop it altogether.'

'I don't understand.'

'It won't work, Heenan.'

'You'd like me to go?'

Meckiff shook his head; the movement brought an increase in pain. 'Just sit there . . .' I may need a witness, he thought. 'Just sit there quietly. But don't record anything unless I tell you.' The room darkened and Ram Channa's turban shone like a cheap green jewel.

Meckiff said: 'Let's talk about Haggard, shall we? Let's try to remember what he said and did, anything that may——' He hesitated. He had wanted to say: 'anything that may bring him to life.' He looked at his wrist-watch. The hands had moved through thirty minutes of negative talk, words and phrases which revolved in cautious circles around that central point which was Haggard; never touching. He knew that each, in his separate way, was resisting him. He felt this collective weight of resistance draw him like a tide from the dead policeman. Haggard, now, was but a pale reflection. He strove to recall him. Even the name took on a quality of nebulousness. Haggard. Inspector Thomas Eveleigh Haggard. Surely the details of face and form . . . ? that thin face and fastidious lips; the erect body with its high shoulders and its air of clean pressed cloth; the shorts, too long, almost brushing the pointed knee-caps; the straight socks with never a burr or a grass-seed or a stain of dust to mar them. . . . And the voice? Surely you can hear the voice? those stilted accents and the careful phrasology (even the breath would be cold against the hand). Tom Haggard . . . He felt a brief shame. Men like Haggard died easily. There had been no warmth: he made no impact and he was one of those whose image faded even in momentary absence. But that did not make his death less tragic; the waste of life less reprehensible. He was a colleague, he reminded himself: one of your officers. They took him and threw him away. And for what? For animals. For the pretty animals. All this effort, this expense, this waste that a few thousand head of game might continue to roam the plains; this complexity of legislation, arrest and trial to postpone an inevitable extinction. Horn, ivory, hide, meat on the hoof; were they, in the sum, any more than that? They looked pleasant on the plain, around the water-holes; and they brought a kind of tranquillity, a feeling of completeness to the landscape. But when you saw them dead or trapped, the old unhealed wounds festering with maggots, the ticks working in the matted hair, smelled the excreta on the rumps . . . He lifted his wrist, listened to the mechanism of the watch. But Haggard wouldn't

have seen it like that. Or if he had, it would have seemed irrelevant. Haggard made obeisance to his own private, very personal god of law enforcement. Nothing else mattered. Remember that directive? he asked himself: the one from the Governor? He had read an extract to Haggard, mimicking His Excellency's port-wine voice . . . 'and all officers, especially those in the Administration and the Police, are advised to familiarise themselves with the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance . . .' 'You hear that?' he said to Haggard. 'We have to learn all about the lovely ducky animals . . .' Haggard had read the directive and the voice said didactically: 'Well, it's the law, isn't it?' Meckiff removed the watch, wound it. He said to them: 'Let's try to remember anything that may help us. You, Maclaren. Haggard was in your truck, wasn't he?'

'Yes.'

'Did he say much?'

'In what way?'

'In any way. Did he talk to you? Make conversation?'

'You mean in the truck?'

'Yes. In the truck.'

Maclaren shrugged. 'A few words . . .'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. A remark or two . . . I don't remember.'

'Oh, come. Surely you can do better than that?'

'No.'

'You don't remember anything at all?'

'Not much.'

'Well, what *do* you remember?'

'He asked me to check my watch with his.'

'And did you?'

'Yes.'

'What time was it?'

'I believe——'

'Yes?'

'I believe it was six forty-five.'

'But you're not certain?'

'No.'

Meckiff nodded. 'It's a point to start from. You checked watches and it was six forty-five. Let's go on from there. What else did he say? Did he mention the trip? The country? The game?'

'I really don't remember . . .'

Vanrennan said: 'He was very serious, that man. He just sat there, stiff as a poker, staring out across the plain.'

'You were in that truck?'

'Yes.'

'You and Maclaren and Haggard?'

'And Jeru.'

'Ah, Jeru . . .'

'You know,' Vanrennan said casually: 'I can't even remember them checking watches . . .'

Meckiff stroked the medal-ribbons. It would continue like this. They had closed their minds. Haggard was dead; so dead that he might never have existed.

'That's the George Medal, isn't it?' Ellis asked.

Meckiff stared.

'The one you're touching . . .'

Meckiff withdrew his hand, let it fall to the table. A stupid habit, he rebuked himself—one that I ought to lose; the fingers on the ribbons like an unconscious sign of vanity . . .

'It must be wonderful to have a decoration like that,' Ellis said. 'Did you go to London for it?'

'No.'

'I remember reading about it—before I came out here. All that terrible danger in the Aberdares . . .'

'It seems a long time ago,' Sloan said. 'The Emergency . . .'

Meckiff rapped the table. 'We are not discussing the George Medal or the Emergency. We are discussing the trip across the plain. We are in the truck and it is six forty-five or thereabouts. Now . . .'

'That man never said much at all,' Vanrennan said. 'But when he *did* speak . . .' he smiled cynically . . . 'it was like a lovely flowing book.'

'He was a cautious man,' Meckiff said. 'He expressed himself with great care.'

Vanrennan nodded. 'With great care.'

'You didn't like him?'

'No.'

'He hated his guts,' Ellis said.

'Why?'

'You'd better ask him.'

'All right. I'll ask him. Why did you hate his guts?'

'I never said that. Ellis said it.'

'But it's true, isn't it?'

'Maybe.'

'You can't hate a man you don't know.'

'This bloke,' Ellis said, 'can hate anybody. Absolutely anybody.'

'Why don't you shut up?'

'Balls.'

'And balls to you, mate.'

Meckiff watched them. The antagonism had flared quite unexpectedly. How important was it? It went deeper than banter, he decided. There had been a glint of genuine dislike in Ellis's eyes, a twist of cruelty in the Afrikaner's mouth. For a moment a veil had been cast aside. He said evenly: 'He was one of my best officers, a good and conscientious policeman . . .' Faint praise, he told himself; something I said out of loyalty. And almost wholly untrue. Conscientious, yes: but for the rest? Haggard had been reticent and withdrawn, devoid of imagination, difficult to assign, a man to arouse hostility against the Department where he, himself, would have sought trust and co-operation. And strangely negative. He had gone to Haggard's quarters after news of the death, standing then in that silent cell of a room, waiting for pain or uncase, for some slight effluvia of the dead man's spirit. But the room was empty, not redolent of anything but the scent of ant-dust and the insecticide with which the uniforms were sprayed. He could see from the window to the inner court, to where the bedding already lay baking in sunlight. Soon, not even the smell of Haggard's flesh, the briliantine of the hair would lie in the sheets and pillows. He had found a training manual in the locker and a Government Printer's copy of the Wild Animal Protection Ordinance, annotated in the margins (Haggard, it was evident, had taken His Excellency's edict seriously). There were no books, no browning newspapers, no letters in ripped envelopes, no diaries. The uniforms were neatly hung but there was nothing in the pockets to indicate the identity or personality of the owner. The shirts and linen lay carefully folded in the drawers and he had rummaged through them, searching for some sign which would recall Haggard to this monastic room. But there was nothing in the folds of the clothes except a bottle of aspirin tablets. He had weighed it in his hand. The seal was intact. He replaced it, smiling sorrowfully. Even that would have been something to grasp; even the testimony to an ache in the head. He restored the garments to their precise arrangements. With other men this search in the contents of drawers had always revealed them; a half-consumed bottle of Scotch, a dirty photograph of the sexual act, perhaps a few french-letters; some evidence of minor human foible that told of struggle, weakness and surrender. He had sat on the bed-spring staring at the room in growing unease. The waste basket was empty. There was no soiled linen, no calendars or pin-ups on the walls, no

framed portrait on the locker. Later, when he consulted Records he found there was no next-of-kin. Even the space for Religion was marked Nonconformist. He studied Ellis's petulant face. Could he blame them if they were reluctant to exhume Haggard? to make the effort to give life and form to a man who, it seemed, had never quite existed? There was an air of unreality about it. He repeated the name to himself, without conviction: Tom, Tom Haggard, Tommy, one of your boys . . .

'We crossed the Steppe,' Sloan said, 'taking a roundabout course and checking with the main post *en route*. We reached a point south of Staedtler's Gorge at just on sundown and it was there that we made camp. Later there was a routine signals check and——'

'Just hold it there,' Meckiff said. 'We've already skipped from o-six-forty-five-hours to sundown. That's a whole day. Surely——?'

'We did nothing that day. Nothing at all. We travelled, we stopped for food, we reached the gorge. That's all.'

'I see.' Meckiff drew his finger down the map. 'South of Staedtler's Gorge.' The finger rested momentarily at the mouth of the dark-brown cleft. The colouring of the map was almost indistinct in that sombre light. He bent to it. The prairie-land was yellow, the forests green; there were light-blue regions of mosses and lichens, brown and purple whorls where the gorge ran backward into hills and mountains. He followed the course of the Suswa to its confluence with the Okui, skimming his spatulate finger-nail above the immense wooded valleys. He stared at it, this careful print which yielded nothing but accurate dimension. There were secrets there——

'Would you like some light?' Freeland asked.

'No.'

'It'll get darker.'

'No.' Perhaps, in this olive gloom, they would relax, become less mechanical. The throb in his head had increased its tempo. The pain seemed to lap within the head-bones like a moving liquid. Haggard's aspirin-bottle shook suddenly across the contours of the map; he wanted to break the seal, empty the tablets and swallow them until the pain retreated into numbness . . . Sweat ran from under the lobe of his right ear and along the jaw. He wiped with a khaki bandanna.

'Are you all right, Superintendent?' Freeland said distantly.

'Yes. All right.'

'Some water, perhaps . . .?'

'No.' He shook his head and the pain surged with the motion. 'I told you . . . the humidity . . . the pressure . . .'

Freeland's face nodded compassionately.

'That's bad,' Vanrennan said. 'Bad when it takes you like that.'

'It won't be long now,' Sloan said. The voice was commiserative. 'The sky—look at it.'

Meckiff folded the bandanna. Another mistake, he knew. The relationship had altered. They were sorry for him. He was vulnerable now: vulnerable to kindness and sympathy. He said unpleasantly: 'Yes, I have a pain. But it doesn't stop me thinking. It doesn't stop me drawing conclusions. And it certainly won't stop me prosecuting this inquiry. I want neither light, water, nor pity. I want facts . . .' He lifted Heenan's pen, stabbed the map with its gold nib. 'Now, the gorge . . .'

'Yes,' Freeland said. 'Staedtler's Gorge.' Then: 'What does that name signify, Sloan?'

'The gorge was named after Staedtler. He was a Boer and he was drowned there at the turn of the century.' Sloan smiled. 'I could tell you a lot about Staedtler.'

'Yes,' Meckiff said. 'But not now. At the moment we are concerned with a more recent death——'

'My nib,' Heenan said testily.

'What?'

'My nib. You've bent it.'

'I bent it?'

'You bent it when you stuck it in the map.'

'I stuck it in the map?'

'Just now. You went like that . . .' Heenan lunged with the pen. The silver side-waves were yellow, now, in lurid half-light. 'Like that . . .'

'I'm sorry,' Meckiff said. 'Extremely sorry.'

'All the same——'

'I said I'm sorry, didn't I?' The jaw was wet again and he made the bandanna into a pad, patted the jaw and then the temples. He said very slowly: 'We are at the gorge. At sundown of the first day. There are two trucks, an anti-poaching team, food to prepare, fires to kindle . . .' He became silent, staring at them, waiting for this deliberate silence to affect them. Let them feel it, he decided. Let them think and sweat. Let them want to break it with the sound of speech. He heard the distant whine of wind, the scratch of a branch against the external wall. Footsteps crossed the compound. A door shut. The branch again. He saw Vanrennan's lips part as if to speak, then meet. The air stirred from the passage of wind through the

shutters. He watched their wan, unmoving faces, the shadow of discomfort. An insect tapped the window. In that thickening silence it seemed that the throb behind his temples must be audible to all. A pair of feet shuffled beneath the table, stilled.

Maclaren said: 'He spoke to me that evening. He asked me about—authority.'

'Authority?'

'Yes. It seemed to worry him. Who gives the orders, he said, Sloan or me? Who makes decisions? Who's in charge? He stood there with that sour look on his face and his nice smart pants with a crease you could cut your hand on. Nothing's defined, he said . . .' Maclaren's voice had unconsciously thinned in imitation . . . 'It could be important, he said, a matter of relationship . . .'

'And what did you tell him?'

'I told him I'd yet to hear anyone give Harry Sloan orders.'

'Was that a sensible answer?'

'I reckon so.'

'Do you agree, Major Freeland?'

'Absurd.'

Maclaren scowled. 'Standing there asking *me* . . . Why couldn't he speak to Sloan?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll tell you for why. He was scared of Sloan.'

'Oh, come . . .'

'Well, why'd he wait until Sloan had gone?'

'Gone?'

'He'd gone to the gorge.'

'Recce,' Sloan said. 'To recce the plain.'

'Was that necessary?'

'I think so.'

'What did you hope to see?'

'The strength and direction of the migrations, perhaps a camp-fire.'

'A camp-fire . . .'

'Even at the camp-fire,' Ellis said, 'he seemed to sit aloof. You couldn't get near to him. He listened, he spoke—and yet he took no part. He made us uncomfortable and we were glad when he went to his tent.'

'That tent . . .' Vanrennan said.

'Oh, yes, he had a swanky tent all to himself—'

'All modern conveniences—'

'—and I wouldn't be surprised if he changed into pyjamas—'

'Now be accurate, man. We didn't see *that*.'

'No, but he had a bloody trouser-press . . .'

'A trouser-press?' Meckiff asked.

'For his shorts.'

'You actually saw this?'

'Yes. Actually . . .'

Maclaren laughed; a rich vibrating laugh which found new areas of pain in Meckiff's head. 'Remember those knees . . . ?'

'And the way he scratched his arse . . . ?'

Meckiff listened. He felt a sudden pity for Haggard. Haggard had taken his terrible aloneness into the bush, taken the walls of that empty cell and built them around him. And it should have been predictable. I ought not to have sent him, he accused himself. No man should be left in that kind of isolation. He felt the first faint touch of personal guilt: like a thread lightly brushing the mind. He said to them, with compassion: 'You must have disliked him very much.'

This room would for ever hold unrest; in the leaning jambs, the smell of creosoted wood, the untrue floor which the feet remembered. There had been changes; a wall removed, the joists, once exposed, nailed now with unpainted ceiling-laths. But the stone fire-breast remained; and on it that clock whose heart had seemed to beat, and stop, in counterpoint to Malcolm Sloan's. Its ebony casing was a formless shadow behind Meckiff's head. To the left was the door which led to the Herbarium and the Library; above it the cedar lintel still jagged from the adze he had used to shape it. To Meckiff's right was the door to the Game Biologist's laboratory, ajar: he could see the gleam of apparatus and a chart, pinned to a cupboard, which Bickerton had prepared to demonstrate the carrying capacity of the Reserve. He read the caption: The Measurement of Animal Population by Biomass. There were columns of figures in green and red inks, Bickerton's conclusion (printed in capitals and heavily underlined) that the land carried an average of sixty animals to the square mile, weighing approximately sixteen thousand pounds. This, then, was the new science, the new ecology? Animals and food, soils and water and ancient habitats reduced to meaningless symbols in beautiful coloured inks? Sloan smiled. Somewhere out there, to every mile of steppe, were Bickerton's sixty hybrid beasts; strange species with trunks, horns, claws, hooves and spotted skins. He could hear Meckiff's voice and he allowed it to ride nasally beyond his awareness. It had happened.

Haggard was dead. Why should this policeman with the thickened face wish to probe and excavate? What purpose will it serve to expose Ellis and Vanrennan in their pitiable weakness?

He heard the bougainvillaea shake in wind. It is the same vine, the same cascade of coloured bracts which I tied as a boy. It will never release me, he thought: this room, the house we built, the pocket of shadow where that enfevered face still seems to float . . . the wind will rise, the sun sink—and I will hear the truck move again down the scarp and into the night of the steppe . . . he was desperate all right: alone and desperate, without love, burned by failure and the seed drying within his loins . . . Why didn't I understand that? Why couldn't I give to him? *Give*: if he could have reached the clock, reached its faltering heart . . . If I could have stopped him and held his fragile body and told him that he wasn't alone, that I loved him . . . If, if, if. The word lay in the minds of men like a cancer. It embraced the suffering of an eternity. If.

Meckiff was reading now from Haggard's log. He tried to listen but the words stopped short of meaning. The room was heavy with the weight of memory. Something hung there like a presence, making its own peremptory demand. Meckiff's voice retreated again . . . The Division had returned from Burma and they had crossed into the Territory, entraining then from Port of Kuru. In the mellow evening of the Mirembe winter it seemed that nothing had altered: this, again, was the heady air of youth, this the scent of homeland and unchange. 'Don't look much different,' Johnny Maclaren said. 'No,' he said. 'No different.' But he had known in the moment of speaking that it was illusion. *They* had changed. He could see the lines of pain in Kerr Maclaren's face, threads of grey hair above the ears. They had lived too near to ordeal and barbarism, too near to fear. Even Johnny had lost his effervescence. The laughter came—but it was less infectious; as if its spring ran colder. Something irreplaceable had been left in the Burmese forest; it was all of youth and gaiety and irresponsibility and it was gone and it would never return. He had stared at them, at the flow of the red savanna behind their shoulders. He said to Kerr: 'The leg—are you sure it will be sound?' Kerr nodded, looked away. Already the first fingers of disunity were thrusting them apart. 'See you, Harry,' they said. 'See you.' They had gone and the dust from the tyres settled in a red film across his boots.

The settlement had grown. There was a new road into the plain, a new rail-track, fences and rectangles of cultivation where the euphorbia had once sprouted. The lease of Malcolm Sloan's house

and land had been assigned by Government to the Game Department. Later, that night, he drank pink gin in the European Club until he felt the nausea twist his stomach, until Quinn's coarse and avaricious face lost contour and only the voice, Irish and persuasive, filtered through mists of alcohol and tobacco-smoke into his comprehension. 'You come in with us,' the voice said. 'The game's built up nicely—there's a good twenty years before we shoot it out. We're forming a company, a safari company, me and Dicky Tremayne. There'll be rich pickings for the right outfit. The Yanks—they'll flock here in droves. Dicky's got a scheme for package tours, agencies in the States, in Rome, in London, maybe all the big capital cities. You come in with us, Sloan. We can use a gun like you. You come in with us . . .' The odour of Scotch and bile belched into his face and he left the Club, walked through Mirembendorp and through the sidings until he came to open country. Cloud ran before the moon, opaque and filmy like snow-water. There was wind in the open and it came with the smell of grain and wetness and it smelt of age and rain-forest and unending distance. So this was the cross-roads? Rich pickings, his hand in the pockets of gun-mad tourists, in the clouts of their brassy women. Rich reward for the acts of destruction. Or something else. Quinn's was not the only voice. There was Kleinert's; that high fluting voice that robbed him of dignity: that, too, was a voice to be heard . . . 'You can destroy or preserve—there is no middle course . . . The day will come when you will have to choose . . .' Choose, choose: the word would not leave him. He was sick that night, vomiting in the roadway and standing cold and empty in the gathering wind. He drank further quantities of pink gin on the second day and again on the third but there must have been some process of inner reflection because on the fourth day he signed a contract with the Game Department.

2

THE VOICE HAD STOPPED and he was aware of silence, Meckiff's half-turned face. Meckiff said: 'I was talking to you.'

'I am sorry——'

'I had been quoting from the log.'

'The log . . .'

'Haggard's log. There is an entry here . . .' Meckiff smoothed the page. 'I take it you've read the log?'

'Yes.'

'Then you'll be familiar with the paragraph. Haggard states that the patrols joined at the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge, that the gorge and the Suswa Valley formed a natural boundary to the zone of operation and that infiltration of the gorge constituted a deliberate departure from the delimiting sector—'

'Beautiful,' Vanrennan said.

Meckiff flushed. 'These are not my words—I merely quote verbatim. But it all seems extremely clear. The team had no authority to enter Staedtler's Gorge, no authority to go down into the Suswa Valley, no right to proceed anywhere without permission—'

'I had a right of decision,' Sloan said. 'In bush I have a right of decision at all times.'

'At *all* times?'

'Yes.'

'Even when you are a component, so to speak, of a planned operation?'

'Yes.'

'Even when you are in perfect radio contact?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you concede the value of discipline? Of a central authority?'

'You sound like Haggard.'

Meckiff nodded. 'In a sense I *am* Haggard. A policeman, a man bred to tenets of discipline and order. Yes, you could say I'm Haggard. He sits in this uniform demanding facts, truth, perhaps some kind of expiation.' He smiled coldly. 'That's a bit theatrical. But we don't like loose ends, Mr Sloan. We don't like evasions. We become highly nervous. We worry—and we don't let go.' He felt his hand move upward to the medal-ribbons and he restrained it. 'Will you answer my question?'

'The discipline?'

'Yes.'

'I'll take it—when necessary.'

'You mean when *you* think it necessary?'

'If you like.'

Meckiff ran his finger along the lines of meticulous handwriting. 'Haggard goes on to say that he protested against the entering of Staedtler's Gorge and that you ignored the protest. Is this true?'

'Yes.'

'And, further, that he requested that you obtain radio permission to enter the gorge but that this request was refused. Is this also true?'

'Yes.'

'Wasn't it a reasonable request?'

'I told you. I have a right of decision.'

'Without reference to headquarters?'

'Without reference to anyone.'

'You arrogate to yourself a complete and unquestioned authority?'

'In bush, yes.'

'Wasn't it your duty to inform HQ of your movements?'

'My duty was to catch poachers.'

'Your only duty?'

'My first duty.'

'Let's suppose that you *had* contacted HQ. Would they have given permission?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know? Oh, come . . .'

'I don't know. It would depend on the location of other patrols.'

'You mean another patrol may have been in a better position to apprehend the poachers?'

Sloan smiled. 'We don't apprehend. We catch.'

Meckiff nodded. 'Yes, that is police jargon. We proceed. We apprehend. We do this continuously and we do it with great care and we never exceed or abuse our authority.' He felt temper ride suddenly behind the throb in his head. '*That* is where we differ from the Game Department.' He saw Freeland's face twist in disapproval. He said to Sloan: 'You knew that HQ would refuse permission, didn't you?'

'No.'

'You won't admit it?'

'No.'

'All right, you won't admit it. But you admit the possibility of a refusal?'

'I suppose so.'

'You suppose so. In that case, if there was a possibility of refusal wasn't it your duty to obtain a precise directive from HQ?'

'My duty was to catch poachers.'

'Duty,' Meckiff said wearily. 'We're back to the same tired word. It seems to have various meanings.' He tapped Heenan's im-

mobilised fist. 'You can record by way of memorandum that Mr Sloan admits proceeding into the gorge in the face of Inspector Haggard's protest and, further, that he refused to signal HQ for permission.

'But that isn't true,' Pitt said.

'Lieutenant?'

'It isn't true. Haggard made no direct request to Mr Sloan for the signal.'

'Then——?'

'He addressed himself to me.'

'As the radio officer?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you do?'

'Nothing.'

'You mean you had some reason, some technical reason for not sending?'

Pitt smiled.

'Did I say something funny?'

'No. But that's what Haggard wanted.'

'I don't follow.'

'A reason. A technical reason for not sending. Something to save his silly face.'

'Let me get this straight,' Meckiff said. 'Haggard asked you to send the signal and you refused. There was no technical reason for refusing. Therefore . . .'

Pitt nodded.

'I'll tell you why he wouldn't send it,' Ellis said. 'He wouldn't send it because he's Sloan's blue-eyed boy.'

Meckiff did not take his eyes from Pitt's face. It was an intense face, smooth and sensitive with a trace of pathos in the eyes, in the set of the mouth. A few years, he thought, a few years back—a mere boy, thin and eager with a reservoir of wonder. The uniform and the solitary pip and the blue para-insignia on the sleeve suddenly seemed incongruous. Too young, he told himself; boys weighted with the tasks of men. He had heard the remark and it had registered. It had come unexpectedly from Ellis's small petulant mouth (that mouth that seemed designed for the accents of spite) and it had fitted. It lay now, in his own mind, like a key in the pocket. Why hadn't I noticed that? he asked himself. Wasn't it obvious? Sloan—astride the wilderness in his heroic cast: this boy—alone with all his enormous need for strength and example. Sloan and Pitt. Poor bloody Haggard; the alliance must, in itself, have helped to exclude

him, push him further into isolation. He looked at them. The humour had left Maclaren's face. Something had replaced it, bringing the face to the edge of ugliness. The Scot stared at Sloan, at Pitt, at Sloan again. Meckiff felt a sudden unease; a feeling that the table, the chair and the floor were not quite stable. What under-currents ran in this humid room? He said to Pitt: 'You refused out of loyalty to Sloan?'

'Yes.'

'Because Sloan was the leader?'

'Yes.'

'But you knew Haggard was a police-officer?'

'Of course.'

'And that he was present in his official capacity?'

'Yes.'

'Hadn't you a loyalty to him?'

'No.'

'No loyalty at all?'

'No, sir.'

Sloan said: 'Lieutenant Pitt was assigned by his regiment at the request of the Game Department. In those circumstances——'

'Yes,' Meckiff said. 'In those circumstances he was entitled to look to you. So tell me this. Did you give this boy a lead? An order? Any kind of positive indication about the message?'

'No.'

'You were silent?'

'Yes.'

Meckiff shrugged. 'In that case the position doesn't alter. The memorandum stands. Silence was tantamount to a refusal. Pitt couldn't, or wouldn't, send the message without your assent. You do agree, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'The lieutenant is a serving officer and, where possible, we ought to absolve him from responsibility.'

'I'd agree there, too.'

Meckiff said to Heenan: 'Just add that Mr Sloan refused to support Inspector Haggard in his request for the signal and that the lieutenant could not, therefore, comply.'

'At this stage,' Sloan said, 'I'd like to define my own position. If the shorthand-writer . . . ?'

Heenan nodded.

'Good. Then write this. Write it lovingly for the Police Department, the Game Department, the Ministry of Natural Resources,

the Superintendent and, if necessary, for the new Game Warden. Item one: I am a Warden and my primary object is the protection of game. All else is subsidiary to that; the marking, the control, the observation, the reports on the lovely coloured paper, the biology, the ecology and all the other ologies. I am a protector. Item two: it follows that the pursuit and capture of those engaged in the destruction of game is also a primary object. Item three: when the team stood at the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge a poaching party of some four hundred men had passed through the gorge and into the valley. Item four: it is beyond dispute that they were capable of inflicting incalculable damage on the game in the valley. Item five: it was decided that the team would track the poaching party through the valley and, since my decision was quite irrevocable and not to be reversed by any contrary order from HQ, a signal thereto was superfluous. Item six: I have expressed myself in elegant and careful style because I know that will commend itself to the Departments concerned.'

Meckiff smiled faintly. 'That's a very good sentiment.'

'And it will look well in typescript,' Heenan said.

He saw the cumulus divide and the light appear in yellow rents. There was a moment in which the pressure was unendurable, in which the needles brought pain to every area of his head. Then he saw the first runnels of rain on the panes and he waited and the rain stopped and he said silently, in desperation: Let it come. Please let it come. The room was dark in the angles that were away from the window and shutters threw transverse bars of shadow across the room, across the jaundiced faces. The room was full of faces; faces at the table, faces in reflection, faces thrown on wall and floor in grotesque distortion. When they moved the room moved. Please let it come. He shut his eyes and he heard it on the roof, that first cascade that was the portent of an emptying sky. When the roof roared he opened his eyes and the windows were blurred and through the blur he saw the earth of the compound around the asphalt darkening in colour, into dark-red colour, and the earth saturating and he went to the window and pushed open the shutters and the casement and the rain had begun to stand in rods and the veranda was awash with water. 'Get out of it,' he told the ranger, and the man ran quickly across the compound and into the fuel store. There was movement in the compound; men working hurriedly in the downpour on the shapes of vehicles, purple hands clumsy on tarpaulins that flapped like wings in the gathering wind.

Why did they wait? Meckiff asked himself irritably: they knew it was coming: why? He stared and it seemed for a second that a part of Africa's immense stupidity had externalised itself, pawed blindly in the rain. He began to breathe deeply, breathing, breathing until the throb and the ache diminished and the rain-cold air brought clarity. The rain drove into the veranda and he held the bandanna out into it, formed it into a damp pad and wiped his face and forehead and the corners of his mouth which had become viscous from speech. When he turned he was in possession again. There was no pain, no feeling of inflating pressure. He could think without effort. He watched them. They were transparent. He felt the beginning of power. He said, encouragingly: 'Why not make yourselves comfortable? Smoke if you wish. Shift those chairs away from the table. Relax. After all . . .' He saw Ellis's lips smile in gratitude. He smiled in response, holding the plump farmer to him in a bond of sympathy. He knew instinctively that he could break Ellis. Ellis needed kindness, was grateful for it. Ellis, perhaps, had been as isolate as Haggard. The ~~palest~~ mouth smiled again. The room, now, was unstill. He continued to snale at Ellis, hearing the scrape of chairs. They had moved from the table and only Heenan and Freeland remained. Sloan pivoted his chair, propped both legs across the corner of the table. The calves seemed enormous and Meckiff stared in distaste at them, at the ridged soles of the boots and the clots of dried mud between the ridges. He saw Sloan draw his pipe from his belt (where it was worn habitually in the manner of a pistol), open a tobacco pouch and pack the bowl. The face irradiated above the bowl, the flesh orange and the eyes deepening from the angle of the upward flare of light. Sloan proffered the pouch.

'No,' Meckiff said. He could hear the drum of rain, the rush of storm-water into the gullies. He liked this incessant noise. It was preferable to silence; a monotone to bridge the gulf between voice and voice. He said to Sloan: 'Now, what about the gorge?'

'In the dry season,' Sloan said, 'the river is very low, so low that it leaves a scree of sand and shale along the length of the gorge. It is possible to take a truck along this scree—until the last half-mile where the scree climbs steeply into a series of rock shelves. From there the shelves mount into overhangs and slopes that lead upward to the head of the gorge. At the time of the long rain there is, of course, no access to the gorge.'

'Not even trek?'

'No. It is quite impassable.' Sloan relighted the pipe. 'I sent Jeru and Athumani ahead and we took the trucks slowly along the course

of the river. It was arranged that Jeru and Athumani should track the party into the valley and report its position——'

'Before we go further into the gorge,' Meckiff interrupted, 'we ought to finally clarify this matter of the signals.'

'We have had sufficient gaff about signals,' Vanrennan said. 'We are sick of talk about signals.'

'Yes,' Meckiff agreed. 'It has been all talk—but no signals. But there is one further point. HQ record indicates that no signal was received after the lieutenant's acknowledgment of the advice of the poaching party. Now, Sloan, did you at any time inform or attempt to inform HQ that you had entered the gorge?'

'No.'

Meckiff touched Heenan's arm and the fist moved to the pad. 'You confirm that no further signal was sent?'

'Yes.'

'You are telling me that you had no intention of revealing your position?'

'I had every intention of revealing my position.'

'Then . . . ?'

'The truck containing the RT was lost later that day.'

'Before you could send the signal?'

'Yes.'

'One thing more. Was Lieutenant Pitt told that he would be sending such a signal?'

'Should I have told him?'

'It would establish intention.'

'Of sending the signal?'

'Yes.'

'In the normal course frequent signals would be sent. Why should I advise Lieutenant Pitt about one particular signal?'

'For Christ's sake,' Maclaren said. 'Let's shut up about signals. The bloody RT went to the bottom of the bloody river and that was bloody that——'

'Of course,' Vanrennan said, 'we could have sent smoke-signals——'

'Or even a runner with a message in a cleft stick.'

'I don't like sarcasm,' Meckiff said. 'I told you I don't like sarcasm.'

'Then shut up about bloody signals.'

'You are telling me to shut up?'

Freeland tapped the table. The fingers were white and fastidious. A ruby in a gold claw ornamented the middle finger and the stone

winked with the motion of the fingers. A dandified hand, Sloan thought; demanding lace or a cambric handkerchief to fall from the sleeve. He looked from the hand to the face. It was saturnine with bright intelligent eyes, small ears and black hair worn overlong at the neck; a Hebrew face bearing the mark of an inherited culture. It was a face of subtlety: too pallid, too civilised for that crude room on the fringe of wilderness. He had been aware of Freeland, aware of the man's silence and the dart of the bright eyes. Freeland had sat almost without movement, composed, making no concession to heat or insects or airlessness; rarely speaking. Sloan knew that they had been watched, listened to, assessed. They were stored, now, in that perceptive mind. The fingers continued to tap. The ruby in its ornate claw was a point of disharmony; or a sign, perhaps, of a love of adornment that found expression in the single jewel. Freeland wore conventional clothes; a bush-jacket and narrow trousers and yellow-brown veldt-boots. Yet there was an air of flamboyance. It came from the man himself; as if the clothes were a disguise worn without conviction. The body was small and strong; but so firm, so rounded that it seemed boneless. Freeland belonged to a more exotic world. Freeland was a fop. But he had authority. There was something imperious in the bearing, in the poise of the head. The tapping fingers were a command for silence and the room was quiet and they waited. Freeland said: 'At this point, Superintendent, one has a direct, a personal interest . . . the equipment, you understand?'

Meckiff nodded.

'The Deputy Warden states that the equipment was lost later that day. Therefore . . .'

Meckiff nodded again.

Sloan said: 'I have already made a full report.'

'A full report?' Freeland said. 'My dear Sloan . . .'

'You want an essay?'

'I want more than a few curt sentences.'

'At one time,' Sloan said, 'a Warden's work lay in the field. Now . . .' He gestured to the documents under Freeland's hand, at the wall and its three metal filing-cabinets, its shelves of box-files. He watched Freeland. The mouth smiled pleasantly. Suavity worn like a mask, Sloan thought. He felt distrust. Why had they appointed him? The hand with the ruby moved to the sheaf of reports, feeling the texture of the paper, retaining each thin folio between thumb and forefinger. He respects paper, Sloan decided; it is important to him. Perhaps nothing really happened until it

was there on paper? There had been no opportunity of meeting Freeland beyond a cursory introduction. Craven had been taken to Mababe and they had flown Freeland down from the Trans Kichuru: he was already installed when the team returned. But something didn't quite fit. Why the haste? And how were they able to appoint Freeland at such brief notice? Craven had been sick for years—but they could not have known that his collapse was imminent. The appointment was already made, Sloan decided; offered and accepted and filed for the contingency of Craven's death or sickness. Or perhaps Craven's sickness had been merely fortuitous, had coincided with a decision to retire him and appoint Freeland. And another thing: why hadn't they offered him the post? He was the Deputy Warden and normally he'd have succeeded Craven. He wouldn't have accepted, of course; he could not have stood the paper, the prison that this dusty building would have become. He wasn't an admin. boy and the Ministry knew that: but at least they could have offered the post or given an explanation. It hurt. It hurt like hell. Trans Kichuru. The name had some connotation beyond that of a game sanctuary. Trans Kichuru. The name grew in significance. It was a loaded name, a name he recognised in the recesses of mind but could not bring to the surface. Trans Kichuru. Freeland continued to smile and their eyes met and he knew that Freeland had seen and understood his distrust.

Freeland said: 'I will read you the—report. It will not take long. It is a miracle of compression. Listen . . .'

3

YOU COULD NOT PUT it into a report. You could not translate heat and effort and the breath of men acid with fatigue, the waning strength and the obscenities that choked in the mouth, the noise of cataracts coming up through the crevices like a dirge and the shadow of the gorge deepening because the day advanced and soon there would be no day only the purple drift into night. You could not chronicle the moment when the truck rolled or the other moment when he knew he had made a mistake or the moment when Haggard's leg crushed. You could not bring pain, despair and frustration into a report so that these things, including the mistakes, were the

product of all the heat and effort and the conflicts and the hatred of the poachers and even the mistakes were forgivable. Seventeen hundred and thirty hours the report said. That was not really the time it began; he had only guessed it to be that time because they liked plenty of clock in the reports and if they wanted that kind of spurious accuracy he was prepared to give it. But it had been the time when the water in the cataracts away from the sun turned grey on the crests, when something deep and bleak moved over part of the ravine and the gorse was lurid above the river. The night was there and a coldness came with the cataracts and there were wings beating further down the ravine and the metal of the trucks was losing heat. The river had pushed thin flumes of water into the beds of the rock-shelves and these, too, were grey.

Ellis said: 'Can we really take the trucks up there?'

'Yes.'

'Right to the head of the gorge?'

'Yes.'

'And down into the valley?'

'Yes.'

'It's pretty steep.'

'I don't like it,' Haggard said.

'You don't have to like it.'

'We ought to go on foot.'

'We would—if there were time.'

'It's awfully steep.'

'You said that once.'

'Are you sure about this?' Haggard asked.

'No.'

'We could go on foot.'

'I don't like it either,' Ellis said.

Maclaren came. 'What's the beef?'

'No beef.'

'He's taking the trucks up.'

'Up there?'

'Yes.'

'Christ!'

'We can't gain anything,' Haggard said. 'We can climb quicker than the trucks.'

'We'll gain when we leave the gorge. We can make good time when we hit the valley.'

'It's a risk.'

'Everything's a risk.'

'What do you think, Ren?'

Vanrennan shrugged.

'It's bloody crazy,' Ellis said.

'Yes, crazy.'

'It's terribly steep.'

'I have to protest,' Haggard said.

'Sure . . .'

'A formal protest.'

Maclaren said: 'He's right, you know, Harry.'

'Maybe.'

'They might get stuck.'

'We'll unstick them.'

'Just look at those rocks.'

'We ought to vote,' Haggard said. 'We're all concerned in this. We have a right to vote.'

'Just cut out the democracy, will you? The light's going.' He stared up to where the walls of the gorge ended and the sky began. The sky was orange, turning red. He could look at the sun without wincing. 'We have to hurry,' he said. 'Everyone out the trucks except the drivers.'

'Harry——'

'You take the second truck.'

'We'll never make it.'

'Stop griping and get in the truck.'

They were right, of course. He had known they were right when the shelves broke into slopes of shale and the rock walls closed around them and the wheels began to slip. He held the truck in the lowest of the gears and he tried to steer where possible with the gradient but he could hear the scuttle of shale and there were moments when the wheel ran free in his hands and the truck slid with the slope. Sometimes the walls opened and he was aware of the precipice and the river so far below that it was like a narrow stream. The night was gathering like smoke on the river and he could see the horizon and measure the absurd angle of the truck against its line. When the tyres ran free he felt his heart pulsate and the blood throb across his temples and he could see his knuckles white and the veins of the hands blue and ridged from the pressure of his grip on that slimy wheel. The walls closed again, then opened, and this time he could not see the river, only the lips of greying rock and the mauve chasm where the river would be. He did not look behind but he saw Maclaren's truck perch, slide and angle in the

driving-mirror and the sun rolling like an orange ball across Maclaren's windshield.

Freeland said: 'But didn't you put chains on the wheels?'

'No.'

'You mean you weren't equipped with chains?'

'I had chains.'

'But you didn't use them?'

'No.'

'Didn't you think to use them?'

'Not at first.'

'But you used them later?'

'No.'

'But you said——'

'I said I didn't think to use them. I remembered the chains when we were half-way up.'

'And——?'

'It was too late for the chains. It was so steep we couldn't have jacked the trucks.'

Freeland repeated it slowly: 'It was so steep you couldn't have jacked the trucks.'

'Yes.'

'It seems unbelievable.'

Maclaren said: 'Well, none of us thought of it.'

'And the light was going,' Sloan said.

'And time?'

'Yes, time . . .'

'And the poachers further and further away?'

'Yes.'

'It was so urgent that you could not strike camp in the floor of the gorge? So urgent that you could not give thirty minutes to chain the wheels?'

Yes, he wanted to say: everything suddenly urgent, everything lost and obscured by the enormous fact of the four hundred poachers. Four hundred. *Actually four hundred.* Don't you know what that means? The spears, the snares and the arrows, the hand-made guns and the muzzle-loaders, the pits and the harpoons, the fires and the nets, the kill kill kill and the trail of carnage? Four hundred in that valley of beginnings. *Four hundred.* Don't you know what that means? Strike camp in the gorge? How many snares in a night? How many pits? How many miles of fence and net? A lot of beauty and rarity could go in a night, a lot of grace and irreplaceable

beauty. Even in thirty minutes. 'Yes,' he said. 'It was urgent.' The word was as dead and unevocative as a stone.

When the truck stuck they were two-thirds of the distance to the highest point of the gorge. The head of the gorge divided into natural ramparts that dominated the valley; and the gorge fell then into wooded rocky slopes as far as the banks of the Suswa. He knew they were near to the valley and that it lay below the towers of basalt, that he had only to surmount these towers and negotiate the boulders on the slopes and the valley would open to receive them. The sun had gone below the ridge and he felt the sweat go cold on his chest but then it reappeared where the ridge dipped into a saddle and the orange light filled the truck and his hands were orange on the wheel. We're going to make it, he told himself: we're actually going to make it. He was aware suddenly of the engine, its mounting note. The noise surrounded him and he was encased in noise and orange light and the vibration of the truck moved through his hands and wrists and into his body. We're going to make it, we're going to make it! He felt the wheels stick, surge, stick again, and he stabbed his foot on the throttle feeling the wheels revolve in the ruts they were digging and the weight of the truck working down into the ruts and he stabbed again and again until the engine reached crescendo and the truck was absolutely stationary and all the wanting, the hope and the striving drained from him to leave him empty at the wheel. He switched off the ignition and applied the handbrake unnecessarily. There was no noise, no other engine noise, and he looked behind and Maclaren's truck lay ten feet below him on the slope and he felt fear touch him because he had not realised the steepness of the slope. It fell in cliffs of nearly horizontal strata to the ravine and he could see mist darkening into purple with depth and through this mist of depth the distant river and its white-grey foam. There were parts of the ledges where not even the shale could hold and he got out of the truck and stood with his legs braced against the declivity. He could not hear the river. He listened but he could not hear it and he felt the silence envelop him, this silence of lonely places.

Maclaren said: 'I could see the truck would stick. And if it hadn't——'

'Yes?'

'I think it would have gone.'

'Down the cliff?'

'Yes. Down the cliff and into the ravine.'

'I don't understand,' Freeland said. 'The truck *did* go.' He peered at Sloan's report.

'No,' Sloan said. 'It wasn't that truck that was lost. It was Maclaren's.'

'You see what I mean about detailed reports?' Freeland asked. He pushed the documents away from him. 'None of this is clear from your report.'

'I'm telling you,' Sloan said. 'I'm telling you what happened . . .'

They had climbed in the tracks of the Land Rovers and they stood silently behind Maclaren's truck, staring at Sloan's embedded wheels, at the angle of the truck and the purple smoke that marked the ravine. They were very tired. He knew they were tired from the absence of comment. They said nothing, only staring at the trucks and the ravine. He walked around the truck, holding to it for support when he reached that side of it that lay to the ravine. The wheels were deeply sunk. One of the rear-wheels, he thought, was imprisoned in a rock cleft. He looked upward along the shale. There were some large boulders, a stunted tree which had lost most of its bark. It looked dead but the bole was wide and strong. He pointed to it. 'We'll use the winch.' He took the cable to the tree, secured it around the bole, came down again to the truck, holding to the cable as he came. 'Check the capstan, Johnny,' he told Maclaren. They were still staring. Only Pitt had recovered from the climb. He saw him bend, tighten the laces of his boots. Haggard said: 'You'll never do it.'

He told them: 'We have to lighten the truck. I want you to get the heavy stuff out, put it in the lower truck.' They stared and he said roughly: 'Quickly. The light is going.' They moved with extreme caution on the slope. After they had transferred the heavy equipment they used the shovels to shift the loose material from around the wheels. Both the rear wheels were imprisoned and the only items of equipment left in the truck were some blankets, two of the packs, his own rifle and some ammunition boxes. 'That'll do,' he said. 'Now get behind the truck and push like hell when we start.'

He used the throttle gently at first, watching the cable tauten, slip once on the trunk, then grip. Then he increased the pressure and the engine mounted in tempo and he felt the truck move, move, the slow inching of the movement, the rear wheels coming from the clefts. He heard Maclaren swearing with effort, the slide of shale.

He pressed again and he saw the radiator cap move upward along the cable. 'She's away!' Maclaren shouted. 'The cow's away!' The truck climbed and he watched the tree, the fall of soil from around its base. There was something different in the angle of the truck. More soil came and he saw the bone-white claws of petrified roots, the soil spilling and the claws coming out and up and the soil breaking into clods and the roots thinner now and the angle of the trunk altering as it dipped toward him and more red-brown soil falling in the shale and he felt the fear take him and dry his mouth and suspend him in a moment of terror in which he could not think or move or speak or take any kind of positive action only wait for the tree to break from its anchorage and the rush backward into the ravine. His foot had not even relaxed its pressure. He was held and he watched the tree tear from its bed and the clots of soil and pebble spatter the windshield, the tree falling across his vision and the branches twist and descend like the snatch of a grotesque hand and the truck running free, back, back, and the scrape and tear of branches and Maclaren's shout and the truck running free and the impact and the blood in his mouth where he had bitten from the impact and then the blessed feeling of immobility, silence, the scuttle of shale, silence. 'Oh, God,' he said. He swallowed blood. 'Oh, God.'

He got out. The strength had gone from his legs and he stood, holding to the door of the truck. The truck was embedded again in the shale and the tree and the cable lay entwined against the radiator. He could smell the deadness of the tree and the heat of the water in the radiator. There was much soil on the truck and he lifted some of it, sifted it through his fingers, looking down into the ravine at the eddies of water. Then he heard their voices and the voices restored him and he turned and there was no truck, only the staring group. He could not assimilate this because the fear had not yet left him and he stared at the truck and the faces and the place where Maclaren's truck had been. Maclaren's red head lifted and the crown took colour from the dying sun. The slope was scarred and torn, bright with slivers of glass. Further down a blanket had caught on the serrated edge of rock and he saw it flap in the rising wind.

Maclaren said: 'She's gone, Harry. She went like a bastard. Over and over, right down into the gorge.' Then, in surprise: 'You can't even see her. She's under the river.'

Haggard pointed.

'Under the river,' Maclaren repeated.

'With all our gear,' Haggard said.

'Yes, all our gear . . .'

'Christ!'

'And the truck's stuck again,' Ellis said.

'You came back on her,' Maclaren said. 'Smack!' He clapped his hands together and the noise threw staccato echo into the gorge. 'She went for a Burton all right, all right. Look . . .' He indicated the rear of the truck. There was a jagged wing, a split tail-board, a smashed tail-light.

'There'll be trouble,' Ellis said uneasily.

Sloan looked at the sun. It was halved now on the summit ridge of the gorge. Everything was touched with luminous red. 'Help me with the tree, Johnny,' he said.

'The tree?'

'We have to get this truck up.'

'You're not serious,' Haggard said.

'I said we have to get this truck up.'

'But it won't go up.'

'It'll go. It'll go like a rocket.'

'Yes. But which way?'

'The tree, Johnny . . .'

'You sure about this?'

'I'll help you,' Pitt said. He followed Sloan to the front of the truck and they disentangled the cable from the branches. Glass fell from one of the headlamps. They unhitched the cable from the trunk. The weight of the trunk lay supported on the radiator. Pitt pushed but it seemed immovable. He pushed again and he felt its weight absorb his strength. 'It's pretty heavy,' he said. 'We'll do it together,' Sloan said. 'Now . . .' They lifted and there was a moment in which Pitt knew he was taking none of its weight, that it lay on Sloan's arms. The trunk came from the radiator, fell to the slope, slithered, gathered momentum. They saw it leave the lip of the scarp, turn in haze, grow small, enter the river. They could not hear it enter the river.

'That's where the truck went,' Maclaren said.

Sloan took the cable up the slope toward the boulders, hitched it around the circumference of the largest boulder. He pulled at it but the boulder did not rock or shift in any way. He came down the cable, checked the capstan. 'The angle's wrong,' he told them. 'It's too acute. The truck may swivel on the slope.'

'Let me drive,' Pitt said.

'No.'

'I'd like that.'

'No.' Sloan climbed into the driving-seat and some of the fear returned.

Pitt said anxiously: 'If she starts to go you'll jump out, won't you?'

Sloan smiled.

'I could tie the door back so you could jump.'

Maclaren came to the window. 'You got plenty of life insurance, Harry?'

'I'll tie the door,' Pitt said.

'No,' Sloan said. Then, to Maclaren: 'I'll tell you what I want. I want two men pushing at the rear. And I want the rest of you at the side of the truck, the ravine side, to correct the sidewise movement of the truck.'

'You mean *below* the truck?'

'Yes.'

'On the slope?'

'Yes.'

Maclaren stared at the ravine and the thin black river, pricked now with crimson sunlight. 'Christ!' he said.

'Do it now,' Sloan said. 'The light is nearly gone.'

When he depressed the throttle and he saw the cable take up its slack and tighten against the weight of the truck he felt the fear repossess him. It had not really left him and the effort of lifting the tree had in some way made him vulnerable to its repossession. He felt it in his limbs and his stomach and he gripped the wheel and the knuckles were white again and the blood throbbed in his face again and a little of it came into his mouth from the bitten tongue and he watched the red sun on the cable, the thin straining cable, and the boulder taking the weight of the truck and now he could not take his eyes from the base of the boulder and he felt them prick from the intensity of his gaze and now the mouth had dried and the blood tasted bad and he pressed the throttle down and the wheels came slowly out of the ruts and the truck moved slowly up the slope and he heard the engine and the clattering shale and the obscenities in Maclaren's mouth and still the truck moved, moved and the sun was there across his vision quartered red on the ridge and the boulder black in silhouette under the sun and he could not see its base or its angle or whether it moved under the weight of the truck. He narrowed his eyes against the sun and the cable was short, now, in perspective and the radiator cap was almost aligned with the boulder and they were at the point they had reached when the tree disrooted and this awareness communicated to his foot and he

pressed in a resurgence of fear and he felt the rear of the truck suddenly slide and the truck swivelling so that the rear would be toward the lip. He heard Maclaren shout: 'Stop it! Stop it! He's under the truck! Stop it!' but he could not stop and he accelerated and the wheels gripped and the truck leapt toward the boulder and he heard a sound like a scream above the pitch of the engine and then he had reached the boulder. He braked, cut the engine, leaving it in the forward gear. He got out and his legs were weak again and he could not control their tremor. He went around the front of the truck and over the cable and he saw their bending shapes and Haggard spread on the slope. 'Don't touch me,' he heard the faint voice say. 'Please don't touch me.' The sun was a bar of warmth across the nape of his neck and, then, he felt the warmth withdraw and when he turned toward the ridge the sun had gone and there were only the rays flung upward on the sky from below the ridge. It was beautiful like a banderole of red silk and it had no connection with Haggard's pain on the slope. He clambered down the slope and the figures were grey, the shale grey, and below them the gorge was black in shadow and he could not even see the river.

There were large puddles in the compound which would join to become a lake. Meckiff stood at the opened casements and inhaled the rain-sweet air. He needed a cigarette but he would wait until Ellis offered; the simple act of acceptance would give Ellis pleasure. The puddles began to push slender rivulets. Soon, he thought, they would come frantically into the compound to clear the drains and gullies. There will be many men in glistening rubber capes and they will work in the rain with energy and enthusiasm. Now that the rain has come they will perform this obvious task.

Maclaren said: 'I told you to stop, Harry. You know I told you to stop. I shouted to you to stop.'

'I heard you.'

'He was under the truck, man. He was half under the truck.' Maclaren drew nervously at his cigarette. 'You must have heard me shout he was under the truck.'

'What about that, Sloan?' Freeland asked. 'Did you hear him?'

'Yes.'

'You knew Haggard was under the truck?'

'I didn't hear Haggard's name.'

'I shouted: Hold it, he's under the truck. Something like that . . .'

'Is that right, Sloan?'

'Yes.'

'You knew a man was under the truck?'

'Yes.'

'For Christ's sake, Harry . . .'

'We've been into all this,' Sloan said. 'Over and over again.'

'But not with me,' Freeland said. 'Or with the Superintendent.'

'I knew a man was under the truck.'

'But you didn't stop?'

'No.'

'You actually went on, knowing that——?'

'I actually went on.'

'What are you saying, Sloan?'

'I knew a man was under the truck. I knew it because I heard Johnny shout. But I could not stop. I could not stop because the truck was sliding and it would have taken them into the ravine and I had to keep going.' Sloan pulled his legs from the table, sat upright on the edge of his chair. 'I *had* to keep going.'

Meckiff watched him. He's losing composure, he thought. He said: 'You're saying that you calmly and deliberately decided to continue? That you decided to continue because there was a danger of the truck taking the three men on the lower slope into the ravine?'

'Of course I'm not saying that. There was nothing calm or deliberate or decisive about any of it. How could there be? I'm simply saying now and in retrospect that that could have happened.'

'Were you concerned for your personal safety?'

'We are all concerned for our personal safety.'

'That isn't what I meant.'

Pitt said: 'The truck had already run back on the first attempt. The second was just as hazardous. I offered to drive but he refused.'

'Mr Sloan was in danger?'

'Yes.'

'He was doing a courageous thing?'

'Yes.'

'And he would not let you expose yourself to risk?'

'That's right,' Ellis said. 'He's his blue-eyed boy.'

Pitt said: 'That is the second time you have used that expression. If you use it again I will beat your silly face in.'

'You would?'

'Yes.'

'You'd beat my face in?'

'Yes.'

'Then do it. Here you are . . .'

 Ellis stepped toward Pitt, proffered

his plump face. 'Do it. Beat it in.' The voice shook. 'Smash it to pieces.'

Ram Channa laughed, clapped his hands. 'Good. Good. What could be better? Two of the British . . .'

'Smash it to pieces . . .'

Pitt sat down. 'For God's sake. What's up with this pipsqueak?'

Meckiff tapped his pockets with the flat of his hands as if he were searching. 'Sit down, Mr Ellis.' He tapped again and Ellis saw this action of the hands and said: 'A cigarette?'

'Thank you, Ellis.' Meckiff took the cigarette, smiling into Ellis's face. The packet trembled in the fingers. Meckiff said: 'Let's have a nice smoke.'

'Yes.'

'A nice calm smoke.'

Ellis flicked his lighter and Meckiff watched the grateful face above the flame. The flame was shaking and he held the wrist in a long and intimate grasp, prolonging the lighting of the cigarette. Ellis asked diffidently: 'Is your head better?'

'As clear as a bell.'

'That's nice.'

'Yes, nice.'

'Rotten thing—headache.'

'Rotten.'

'I knew a bloke——'

'Sit down,' Meckiff said kindly. 'Sit down and take it easy.'

Ellis sat.

'Now,' Meckiff said. 'What were you trying to tell me?'

Ellis stared at Pitt.

'You'd better be careful,' Vanrennan said. He touched Pitt's arm. 'This Army boy here . . . all that unarmed combat.'

'Mr Ellis?' Meckiff said softly.

'I said he was Sloan's blue-eyed boy.'

'And——?'

'If he'd been under the truck . . .' Ellis hesitated. The face was wary.

'Go on,' Meckiff said.

'Well, things might have been different.'

'Different? In what way?'

'He means,' Sloan said, 'that if Pitt had been under the truck I'd have stopped.'

Meckiff stared. 'Is that right, Ellis? Is that what you mean?'

'Yes.'

'You are serious?'

'Yes.'

'But he couldn't have known who was under the truck.'

Heenan's pen moved across the pad and Meckiff nodded in approval. 'That's so, isn't it?'

'I don't know.'

'Exactly,' Pitt said. 'Fatty doesn't know.'

Ellis said carefully: 'I know this. The truck was on the slope at a considerable angle. From the driver's seat Sloan must have been able to see the three men on the lower flank of the truck.'

'You agree, Sloan?'

'Sounds reasonable.'

'That's no answer. Were you able to see them?'

'Two of them.'

'Only two?'

'Yes.'

'Which two?'

'Maclaren was opposite me. And Vanrennan was behind him.'

'And the man on the rear wheel?'

'I couldn't see him.'

'No, you couldn't see him. But did you know it was Haggard?'

'I know it now.'

'But did you know it then?'

'I'm not sure. I may have known.'

'Then put it another way. Did you know which men were pushing at the rear?'

'Yes.'

'Who were they?'

'Ellis and Pitt.'

'In that case you must have known it was Haggard at the rear wheel. A simple deduction . . .'

'A simple deduction?' You think I'm doing mental sums in a situation like that?'

'He knew,' Ellis said. 'He knew all right.'

'Let's take it a bit further,' Meckiff said. 'When Maclaren shouted could you still see him?'

'Yes.'

'And Vanrennan?'

'I *could* have seen him.'

'If you'd looked?'

'Yes. But I was watching the rock.'

'The rock to which the cable was attached?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't you turn when Maclaren shouted?'

'I don't think so.'

'But you're not sure?'

'No. I'm not sure.'

'But if you'd turned you'd have known it was Haggard under the truck?'

'I suppose so.'

'By a process of elimination you'd have known it was Haggard?'

'A process of elimination,' Pitt said with scorn. 'You expect him to apply processes of elimination when the truck is sliding and he's trying to hold it and he does not know if the rock or the cable will hold or whether the truck and himself and the men below it will all go down into the ravine? Do you expect that?' He felt suddenly excited and he rose from the chair which he had positioned by the window, threw his half-smoked cigarette out on to the veranda, walked the length of the table. Meckiff and Ellis stood in obvious alliance by the further casement and he stopped, turned so that he looked down into Freeland's face. He said: 'Why aren't you defending him? He is your deputy, one of your wardens. You owe it to him.' He stared into the semitic face, the deep eyes which revealed nothing of the man.

Freeland smiled. 'Don't be impertinent.'

'It is your duty to defend him.'

The smile came easily again. It did not touch the eyes and Pitt knew that he could not reach him. He shrugged and Maclaren said: 'Have another fag,' and he accepted it and he turned to the window and the beating rain. The light was sombre and the sky still olive where it met the plain and the rain came obliquely at the building. He said: 'None of this will help Haggard.'

'No,' Meckiff said. 'But it has to be done.'

The report would not reveal the cold of that night in the truck below the ridge or the sound of wind which came to them with the coldness of water and lightless places. It would not reveal the quality of the dark; an absolute blackness which seemed to flow from the depths of caves. There was no satisfactory kindling and they took Haggard into the truck, laid him on the floor with a pack to support the head and the blankets for warmth. Then, when darkness was complete and the cold insupportable, they moved into the truck around Haggard's body. He had ceased to moan or to protest against the pain or the cold and Sloan took a shooting-lamp from a bracket inside the truck, fixed it to his head and examined the

leg. It lay at a normal angle but the flesh was contused and impressed with the tread of the tyre and fibres from the sock; filmed with dirt. The tibia was crushed and already the leg looked dead and useless. There was blood above the ankle and Sloan felt with his fingers where the jagged bone had pierced the skin and when he removed the boot the tongue and the lining were wet with blood. They washed and splinted the leg and, later, when they extinguished the lamp, the interior of the truck was absolutely black and they were aware of the whine of wind and the intensifying cold and the pain which lay between them on the floor.

He watched their faces ripen in the dawn-light and the stubble shade the flesh and he said to them: 'I have to tell you something.' He pointed to an area of wet shale between the front wheels of the truck. 'The radiator core is cracked. It was cracked by the impact when the tree fell across it and it is beyond any kind of improvised repair. The truck is useless and will have to be abandoned.' He saw the confusion in Ellis's face. 'The plan we formulated in the truck last night is now without value and that, too, must be abandoned. Another disagreeable item is that we are very short of solid ammunition.' He lifted his rifle. 'This is a .404 magazine rifle. It is the only rifle remaining to us and the ammunition left in the truck is unsuitable. I have two clips in my jacket but that is the extent of it.'

Vanrennan tapped the cartridges in the loops above his breast-pocket. 'Four rounds.'

'Anyone else?'

They were silent.

'I see. That makes sixteen rounds.'

'Yes, sixteen.'

'It's not much.'

'No.'

'But it'll get us a meal.' He stared at them. They were apathetic. Haggard's injury possessed their minds and they did not care much about the lack of ammunition.

'He don't look too good,' Vanrennan said.

'In the night,' Ellis said, 'I thought . . .' He touched the truck. Haggard was in there, that crushed leg between the blankets and the mind revolving around the focal point of pain. Some of Haggard's pain seemed to transmit to his own right leg, followed by an immediate weakness. He tried to dispel the image of the blood-black ankle and its bits of splintered bone but it would not go and he shifted the weight of his body from the leg and there was a feeling

that he would cry in anguish when the weight restored itself. Silly, he told himself; the imagination . . . He picked up a pebble, threw it over the lip, watched its trajectory into the ravine. 'I can see the truck,' he said.

'Where?'

'There. A sort of black shadow under the water where the river narrows.'

'Could be.'

Sloan went to the rear of the Land Rover. Haggard was staring at the roof; the face grey; the eyes deep-sunk and rheumy. He touched the forehead and it was cold against his finger-tips. 'That's good,' he said. 'No temperature. No infection.'

Haggard said nothing.

'How do you feel?'

'Rough.'

'Any pain?'

Haggard grimaced.

'I mean is it bad? Really bad?'

'Bad enough.'

'I'll have to move you.'

'No. Don't do that.'

'It's warm outside.'

'No.'

'I'll put you in the sun.'

Haggard shook his head.

'In the sun . . .'

'No.'

'I won't hurt you.' He climbed into the truck, bent across the blanketed figure.

'Don't move me, Sloan.'

'You can't stay here.'

'Why not?'

'The truck's u.s.'

'The truck?'

'The radiator. It bust when the tree fell.'

'Please don't move me. The leg . . .'

'I won't hurt you.' He lifted and he felt the body flinch. 'There . . .' he said. He brought Haggard from the truck to the early sunlight and laid him by the rock-wall. 'You want to sit up?'

'No.'

'Did I hurt you?'

'No.'

'I told you I wouldn't hurt you.' He looked at the pallor of Haggard's face. The light was pink, the gorge and the rocks and the river pink; the face grey. A busted leg, he told himself: only a busted leg. And it's clean. He'll be all right. They'll set it for him and he'll be all right. He looked again but Haggard had closed his eyes and he could not read anything in the face except the evidence of pain. He'll be all right. But it's more than a busted leg, more than a simple fracture; the bones, the tissue and the blood-vessels crushed by the tyre. He needs treatment, he needs it now. Now. He felt his impotence. Even the medical kit had gone. The whole bloody lot had gone; the medical kit the snake-bite kit the guns and the ammo and the radio and the bed-rolls and the tent and the food-box and the pots and pans and four of the packs and the canned beer and the fuel and most of the water-bottles and the hurricanes and the manilla and the bottle of Hennessy he'd put in as a surprise for them. Even the tobacco had gone. God, the tobacco gone! Everything good had gone. The rage grew and he surrendered to it and he could not think coherently. Everything gone. The radiator bust and the leg-bones bust and Quinn bust. Everything bust. And the leg. They'd set it and it'd be fine, it was clean, as clean as a whistle. Even the frying-pan gone. But they'd got two lovely shovels two lovely bloody shovels and maybe they could hold them over the fire (if they had a fire) and fry the meat on it (if there was any meat when the sixteen lovely bloody rounds had gone). Everything gone except the blankets and the boxes of .500 which were meant for the sodding elephant-gun which lay in ten feet of river water. And the leg and the beautiful pointed knee-cap? It'll never look the same—not even if he wears the shorts long and pulls the socks up high. He'll have to wear trousers. That's it—trousers. Everything gone or bust. He had the rifle and the logs and Krieb's piece of bulletin. It was clean with no sign of fever. But if that developed? The sepsis and the fever? There were no antibiotics. He felt the rage drain suddenly and he looked again at Haggard's face and the eyes were closed and the lids faintly veined: the face seemed cadaverous.

He said to them: 'Listen carefully. This is the position as I see it. We are at the head of Staedtler's Gorge and we are without transport or means of communication. We have one four-shot gun and a little ammo. Athumani and Jeru each have a government-issue single-loader of the same calibre and that means that they too are limited to whatever ammo they are carrying. We have an injured man who is in need of treatment. And we have an uncompleted mission which I intend to finish.'

'The poachers?'

'The poachers.'

'To hell with the poachers.'

'Yes, Johnny, to hell with them. But we still have to catch them.'

'This man need a doctor,' Vanrennan said. 'Quick.'

'Agreed.'

'Then we have to go back,' Ellis said.

'Through the gorge and across the plain?'

'Yes.'

'Will that get him a doctor quickly?'

'Nothing will get him a doctor quickly.'

'Why argue?' Haggard said from the ground. The eyes remained closed and the voice was remote. 'Sloan is going on. Sloan wants the poachers.'

'Is that true?' Ellis asked. 'That we're going on?'

'Listen.' Sloan said. 'I am trying to assess the situation for you. If you will think, if you will stop throwing stones into the gorge . . . ' He waited and they were still and quiet and the sun strengthened and the patterns on Haggard's blanket grew into whorls of ochred colour. 'Consider the problem of Haggard. He must now be carried. We have blankets and there are bamboo thickets at the foot of the ravine. That means we have the material to make a dandy—which can be carried by two men. But the going may be slow and difficult. It will take a day to clear the gorge; and the plain has then to be trekked as far as the main scout-post. I estimate another two days for this. There is a nearer post but it is not manned and there is no transmitter with which to send a message. Now, there is always the possibility of assistance; the odd safari, a game-department patrol, even the spotter. But the plain is an immense area and it would be unwise to rely on chance encounter. The main objection is that the plain is dry. It would also be possible to back-track through the gorge and to camp at the mouth and to send the scouts across the plain for assistance. This scheme would gain a little time and it would save Haggard from exposure on the plain. I should also point out that I have made no precise rendezvous with Athumani and Jeru and I do not know when or where they will rejoin us.'

'What about the UNO team?' Pitt asked.

'They moved out yesterday.'

'All talk,' Haggard said in his faint voice. 'Futile talk. He has made up his mind. He will go into the valley. He will go alone if

necessary and he will arrest them single-handed. The whole of the four hundred.' He laughed and the effort of laughing caused him to cough and the body shook under the blanket in a sudden paroxysm. He seems fragile, Sloan thought; as if the accident has in some way reduced him.

He said: 'The alternative is to continue into the Suswa valley. At some point we shall meet with the scouts and, later, with the poaching party. The advantages are fourfold. One: we shall be following the river and there will be ample water. Two: the poaching party will have weapons and ammunition which can be confiscated. Three: it is virtually certain that the party will have arranged a rendezvous with motorised transport—transport that will enable us to drive Haggard across the Onde Marsh to the settlement of Okui. Four: the juniper woods form part of the Forestry Reserve. There is a Forest Station approximately forty miles to the west and, nearer, a fire-observation post which maintains a line of communication to the Station. That is the situation as I see it.' He looked directly at Maclaren, using the phrase which he knew would link them: 'Is everyone very clear about this?' Maclaren turned but the face was unsmiling.

'I don't like it,' Ellis said. He held a pebble and he began to roll it nervously between the palms. 'I don't like it at all. Oh, it sounds fine the way you put it. So clear and simple. So uncomplicated. We go on into the valley. We find water and food. We catch the poachers and soon we have guns and supplies and a motor lorry waiting there in the middle of Africa to take Haggard to the doctor. And we cross the Onde Marsh and soon we're all in Okui and everything's fine. But is it?' He dropped the pebble, retrieved it. 'I'm a new boy out here but even I know the Suswa Valley is an enormous region of bush and rain-forest, hundreds and hundreds of miles of it. Even I know the Onde Marsh is a dangerous swamp full of fly and bad water, that even the game don't touch it . . .' The pebble was rapid now in the hands. 'Who do you think you're kidding, Sloan? We don't even know we'll find the poachers. And what if the spotter was wrong and it's not a big party at all? Maybe they're not even poachers. Maybe it's just a tribe on the move and there won't be any guns or ammo or motor transport sitting with its engine running.' He moved nearer to Sloan, hurled the pebble into the ravine. They heard its passage, the tap-tap-tap into silence. 'You don't care a damn what happens to Haggard. You want the poachers and you'll go on and you'll find any excuse to justify it. We ought to return. We *have* to return. The plain is big, yes, but

there's lots of cover and game. At least we'll be moving in the right direction, nearer to . . .' He hesitated.

'Civilisation?'

'Yes. That's a dirty word to you. A real dirty word. Well, some of us like lights and houses and people and a bit of decent food and soap and running water and a paper off the midday 'plane. We like these things. And we don't like mosquitoes and bellowing jungles and crapping in the grass with snakes crawling under our arses—'

'Ah, shut up,' Vanrennan said.

'Does anyone support Ellis?' Sloan asked.

'They said nothing.'

'You, Johnny?'

Maclaren shrugged. 'You're the guv.'

'Pitt?'

'The valley.'

'And you, Ren?'

'I'll stick with the water.'

'Good. Then we'll move off.' He looked down at Haggard and the eyes opened and, momentarily, they were freed of pain and he saw an accusation that seemed to reach out and touch his own quiescent guilt. 'We'll move off,' he said. He turned and set his face to the valley.

'That was where it began to go wrong,' Sloan said. 'We went down into the valley from the ridge and we followed the river but we never met Athumani and Jeru. We trekked for the whole of that morning but we never met them. They had, in fact, re-entered the gorge on the river level at about the same time we came down from the ridge.'

'You mean you passed each other on different levels?'

'Yes. I realised later that this must have happened. It meant I was short of two men and two guns. I'd planned to use the scouts to get Haggard through the timber and up to the Forest Station if that became necessary. But now—'

'But now,' Ellis said, 'all he'd got were two old crocks. Two useless old crocks. Me and Vanrennan—'

'Wait,' Meckiff said. 'Let's stay with the scouts. You say they re-entered the gorge?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because there was no rendezvous and if they did not meet us in the valley they would expect to meet us on foot in the gorge.'

'At the river level?'

'Yes.'

'Not at the top?'

Ellis laughed. 'They are trackers, not lunatics. They would not expect trucks to be hauled up cliffs.'

'We ought to get this straight,' Freeland said to Sloan. 'Had you ever taken transport over the gorge?'

'No.'

'Had you ever attempted it?'

'No.'

'Then——?'

'I thought I could do it. I was wrong but I thought I could do it.'

'But why should the scouts expect to join you on the floor of the gorge?'

'Yes,' Meckiff said. 'And why did they go straight through?'

'Because I hadn't told them I would attempt the ridge.'

'Ah,' Freeland said. 'Now it's coming out. He hadn't told them he would attempt the ridge. He sent the scouts off without briefing them on his own movements.'

'Normally,' Sloan said, 'I would expect them to go deeper into the valley, to pick me up well beyond the gorge.'

'It was just bad luck?'

'Yes.'

'Not bad judgment?'

'Of course it was bad judgment,' Meckiff said. 'Why can't you admit it, Sloan? You made a mistake.'

'Tell me,' Freeland said. 'Why did the scouts return early?'

'Because the poaching party had divided.'

'Into two?'

'Into three.'

'Into three separate parties?'

'Yes.'

'They wanted to report this?'

'Yes.'

'Let's keep with the scouts,' Meckiff said. 'They entered the gorge. When?'

'I told you—at the time we descended. That would be an hour or so after sunrise.'

'And then?'

'They saw the truck. It was upside down, deep, in the shadow of the cliff.'

'It must have puzzled them.'

'It did indeed. The truck had evidently fallen free for some distance and there were no marks or scars to indicate that it had dropped from above. They knew it could not have fallen in from the river bank because the cataracts downstream form part of a natural rock barrier and this would prevent any truck from coming that far. So——'

'So they stood and stared,' Ellis said with sarcasm.

'Yes. Like all Africans they scare easily at things they do not understand. They could not even see if men were trapped inside the truck. There had been an accident, a catastrophe with certain puzzling features and it had happened in a lonely gorge by a river they respected. They were frightened and they decided to return through the gorge to the plain.'

'While the team went further into the valley?'

'Yes. Into the valley.'

Into the valley. There was a sense of enfoldment and they moved through a contained sweetness of air and pink refulgent light: it closed around them like the petals of a flower. This scent of juniper and the soil of woods was also the scent of antiquity. It came from where the roots grew and it was diffused by the bark and sap of the junipers and the air was thick because of it. They kept to the river. The river was low and Pitt saw where the jointless stems of a plant like a sweetrush grew upward from the bed, the water so clear that he could see their yellow-green stems bent by refraction but still sharp in line beneath the water. He had tasted the river, dipping with his hand and tasting it on his fingers and this, too, was sweet, with none of the bitterness of minerals. Everything in the valley was aromatic. It disturbed him. An immeasurable age lay on the valley and its essence was like the air of an old tomb, so old that even death had alchemised into sweetness. His hands had chafed from the rub of the bamboo poles and he stared across Haggard's feet and the grey face to Johnny Maclaren's back. 'We'll have a rest,' he said: but Maclaren did not turn or halt or acknowledge him and he shifted the grip of his hands and, soon, the next fold of the valley appeared where the river wound.

The juniper forest lay across the river. It seemed boundless and it climbed in red colonnades from the river and up the bowl which the hills formed and to the ridge of the hills. By noonday it surrounded them and they could turn full circle and the forest was the limit of their vision. The light had deepened, seeming now to distil its colour from the trees. It was this same pristine light which he had

seen with Sloan when they first climbed the gorge and he was aware of a quality not associated with light. It had newness: as if the luminosity of a first dawn had been retained, perpetually renewed itself from within the valley. It lay below the tree line in a faint pink wash. The river was enamelled with it. He looked down at his hands and the flesh was aglow with it.

Sloan was at his elbow. 'It's wonderful, isn't it?'

'Yes. Wonderful.'

'I told you it would be.'

Pitt stared at the forest. He felt its tranquillity. Even the bird-song lay behind a veil of somnolence.

Sloan said anxiously: 'You do like it, don't you?'

'Yes. But——'

'But what?'

'It's all so—lonely.'

'That disturbs you?'

'In a way.'

'I'll take the stretcher.'

'Thanks.'

'I can never remember whether to walk in step or out.'

'Out,' Maclaren said. He had not turned.

The valley opened and the hills fell back from the river in violet folds and the forest ran with the curve of the hills until the crowns were lost high in the mist of distance and everything seemed vast and illimitable: Pitt felt the tranquillity desert him and the stirring of uneasé. A marsh-buck left the further river-bank and the sand, white in sun, was scattered with the spoor but beyond the spoor the sand was unmarked and it shelved back to the forest in unbroken slopes and no life had touched its smoothness and where the tree-shadow fell the sand was coral-red. The life of the buck seemed an intrusion: it had trembled there in the river sand and then it had gone and soon the sand would sift grain by grain into the tracks and obliterate them and the loneliness of the forest would fall like its own lengthening shadow. He stared at Sloan and at Maclaren's sweat-dark back and he wanted to say, urgently: What are we doing here? What are we doing? He looked behind him to where Ellis and Vanrennan trudged, then at Sloan, at the forest again. There was no sign of cut timber, no mark of the woodman, no evidence that the forest had ever been disturbed. He felt its immensity, its utter stillness. He said: 'Harry.'

'Yes?'

'Are you sure we can get through the forest?'

Sloan did not reply.

'It's enormous.'

'Yes.'

Maclaren said: 'We could have shot that buck.'

'And swum the river for it?'

Maclaren laughed.

'Plenty of game,' Sloan assured him.

'Yes, plenty.'

'We'll never get through the forest,' Pitt said with sudden conviction. 'Look at it . . .' It was dark beyond the wash of noonday light and no light filtered through to the forest floor. There was no secondary growth; only this repetition of red-brown trunk, these numberless ranks of ancient trees retreating into depth. The trunks seemed to lean and replace each other and his eyes balked at the illusion of movement and he turned away.

Sloan said: 'I never said we were going through the forest.'

'You said ——'

'I said there was a way through to the Forest Station.'

'A way through,' Haggard said with irony. 'Listen to him.'

Maclaren stopped, lowered the head of the stretcher.

'Tired?' Sloan asked.

'No.'

'Then keep going.'

'What about the scouts?'

'What about them?'

'I reckon we've missed them.'

'Maybe.' He had not lowered his end of the stretcher. Haggard lay at an angle, feet uppermost.

'I'm certain we've missed them.'

Haggard said irritably: 'It's hurting my leg . . .' He could feel the blood throbbing in his head.

'Pick it up, Johnny,' Sloan said. 'We're losing time.'

'Is that right?' Pitt asked. 'About the scouts?'

'Yes.'

'But we followed the river.'

'It's quite obvious,' Haggard said. The voice was thin; it came from a well of pain. 'They went through the gorge.'

Pitt looked behind. Ellis and Vanrennan had halted a quarter-mile down, sat dejectedly on a rock. 'They're knocked up,' he said.

'I reckon Haggard's right,' Maclaren said. 'We've been on the move since dawn. They should have picked us up.'

'They followed the river through the gorge,' Haggard said. He

grasped the bamboo poles, shook them petulantly. 'Will you please put me down?'

Sloan lowered the stretcher. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Please.'

Sloan gave it to him and some of the water ran from the mouth and into the hollow of the neck. Haggard said: 'It's obvious they went through the gorge.'

'They'll be back.'

'To find us?'

'Yes.'

'You need them, don't you?'

'Of course I need them.'

'I mean—to carry me.'

'Yes.'

'To carry me through the forest?'

'Yes.'

Haggard grasped his arm. 'There really is a Forest Station?' Fear touched the eyes.

Sloan nodded. 'West through the timber.'

Maclaren grinned. 'You can't miss it.' He stared downstream. 'Look at those two old birds.' He whistled through his fingers. The sound entered the forest and pierced its silence and a pair of guinea-fowl flew from shadow into light. Ellis looked up and Maclaren beckoned and they rose from the rock, came slowly along the bank.

'They're knocked up,' Pitt said again.

Haggard had not relaxed his grasp and Sloan remained bent by the stretcher. He smelled the stale odour of the bandaged leg. Haggard said: 'We ought not to leave the leg too long.'

'Does it hurt?'

'Yes.'

'I'll wash it again.'

'No. Don't touch it.'

'It should be done.'

'No. Just leave it be.' The grip tightened. 'You swear there's a Forest Station?'

'Yes.'

'You wouldn't lie to me, Sloan?'

'No.'

'Suppose the scouts don't come?'

'They'll come.'

'But suppose they don't?'

'Don't worry.'

'But I do worry. On this stretcher . . . one thinks all the time.'

'They'll come.'

'One thinks of nothing but the leg. The leg, the leg, the leg . . . I don't want to lose it, Sloan.'

'You're not going to lose it. The scouts will come and they will take you up through the timber and there will be a doctor, everything you need.'

'You're not just saying that?'

'No.'

'I'm sorry to be frightened. But one's leg, you understand?'

Ellis and Vanrennan came to the stretcher, stood lethargically. Shadow fell across Haggard's face and the flesh became greyer.

'He looks beat,' Vanrennan said.

'And you too, chum,' Maclaren said. 'Where've you been?'

'I been thinking.'

'You have to sit down to think?'

Vanrennan removed his hat, stroked his hair. The cropped hair sprang erect when the fingers passed and the hand was wet when it came away. The eyes were narrow now against the sun, the loose skin beneath them dark with strain. A pulse beat faintly in the neck.

'I reckon you've had it,' Maclaren said.

'Ah, shut up, you redheaded bastard.'

Maclaren smiled.

'We've both been thinking,' Ellis said. He opened his shirt, blew down the neck. 'The scouts—'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'We know all about the scouts. It is high noon and it is evident that we have missed them. They have gone through the gorge but they will return when they fail to find us.'

'You can't be sure.'

'They will return.'

'No,' Ellis insisted. 'If they go through the gorge they will cross the plain. Why *should* they return? Why? Give me one good reason.'

'They will return,' Sloan said, 'because they know I don't quit.'

Maclaren nodded gravely. 'We always get our man.'

'It's not funny,' Ellis said. 'There's nothing funny about any of it. For God's sake, Sloan, look around you. It's a bloody wilderness. Look at it, man. An absolute bloody wilderness. We go on and on and on, deeper and deeper into the valley. And what for . . .?' He stared at Sloan. The words died. It had all become unreal, without motive. He kicked at the sand and it spurted on Haggard's blanket.

'He might just be right,' Vanrennan said. 'He's fat and windy and

he should've been a bank clerk but he might just be right.'

'They'll come,' Sloan said.

'Look at the sky. The wet's building up. It might spill any time. They wouldn't want for to get caught in that gorge, now would they?'

'Makes sense,' Maclaren said.

Sloan felt Haggard's hand around his ankle. He did not look down and he heard the voice say: 'Are they right, Sloan?'

He hesitated.

'Are they right?'

'They could be right.'

The hand tightened. 'And that means——?'

'It means I'm short of guns.'

'Guns?'

'Guns are important, aren't they?'

'Not to me.'

Sloan moved and he felt the hand retain him. 'They'll come,' he said.

'But if they don't?'

'So we have one gun.'

Haggard shook his head. 'The forest. I'm talking about the forest.'

'What about it?'

'You said you needed the scouts for the forest.'

He moved and the fingers clutched, then fell from his ankle. He looked at Haggard and the fear had possessed the eyes and he saw his own guilt mirrored there. 'I'm sorry about your leg,' he said. 'Truly sorry.'

Haggard said accusingly: 'You don't know the way, do you? You need the scouts because you don't know the way to the Forest Station. That's the truth, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'So if the scouts don't come . . .'

He nodded.

'For Christ's sake,' Maclaren said. He touched Sloan's arm. 'We've got to get this poor bugger back, Harry.'

'Yes,' Vanrennan said. 'He's a copper and I got no sympathy for coppers not even coppers with busted sticks but I think we have to get him back.'

'The gorge?'

'Yes.'

'And across the plain?'

'You know a better way?'

'Through the timber.'

'But if the scouts don't come——'

'If the scouts don't come we have to consider alternatives. But it is too early to be certain.' Sloan faced them, the legs apart and the rifle cradled in the arms. 'We go on, keep to the river, give the scouts until dusk. I'll get you something for the pot. Then . . .' He sensed their resistance. They stood grouped at the foot of the stretcher and he was alone behind Haggard's head and the injured man divided them and he knew that he would continue to divide them. He looked down across the magazine of the rifle to Haggard's averted face and he saw the throat move with the swallowing of spittle. Then he looked at Pitt and he said, smiling: 'What would the Army do, Alan?' but Pitt did not respond and they were silent and they heard the suck of the river at the bank and the stillness of the forest came to them and held them in the sun.

Meckiff wiped condensation from the window-pane. Squalls of wind came intermittently to the compound, taking the rain and twisting it in quick grey sheets which hung momentarily then swept into the sodden earth. The anxiety had left him and he knew that a compulsion to talk was upon them. Haggard had grown slowly to life; the memory of pain and protest and splintered bones repossessed them and the room was unquiet with his presence.

He watched the line of hills beyond the straw shacks and the petrol-dump. They were distant but he knew from their deepening colour that they were aflow with water. A clump of thorn lay in the saddle of the hills, so square on the crowns that there was an effect of topiary. 'You know,' he said to them. 'Those soft green hills—one might be back in the Cotswolds.' He smiled in contempt of himself. It was nothing like the Cotswolds. It had not the remotest resemblance to the Cotswolds. A solitary termite-hill stood like an erect finger. One would not see *that* in the Cotswolds. But it was something he had to say; an interpolation which he could not restrain. 'The Cotswolds,' he repeated carefully. The thick lips and the negroid nose would dissolve behind an image of a homeland of green English pastures. He turned and he saw Ram Channa's hand go to the surgical gauze.

'Channa,' he said. 'We have sufficient evidence to charge you. You know that, don't you?'

Ram Channa smiled.

'You mentioned a solicitor.'

'Yes. Asian solicitor.'

'Have you discussed this?'

The turban nodded.

'We have the evidence of Mr Sloan, Mr Maclaren and Lieutenant Pitt. It is incontrovertible.'

Ram Channa smiled again. 'That is a good word. I will store it for future use.'

'Why come without your solicitor?'

'No need.'

'There are some formidable charges. Hunting game animals without a licence, unlawful possession of government trophies, cruelty—'

'And being in possession of poisoned weapons,' Freeland said.

'Formidable,' Channa agreed.

'This doesn't disturb you?'

'No.' The hand went again to the wad of surgical gauze, tapped it significantly.

'Yes,' Meckiff said. 'I know exactly what you mean.' He saw the guile in Channa's face. The green puggaree was a point of flamboyance in that barren room. He asked: 'Will you bring charges against Mr Sloan?'

'It is possible.' The gold tooth gleamed. 'I have the evidence of Mr Maclaren and the lieutenant. It is—incontrovertible.'

Meckiff smiled. 'It would be possible to reach an understanding.'

'Yes. An understanding.'

'I will be extremely frank, Mr Channa. Certain official quarters would not welcome a charge of brutality against an officer of the Game Department.'

The turban leaned.

'We would surrender our rights in respect of offences against the Game Ordinance . . .' He watched the stained eyes for reaction. 'There,' he said. 'I'm saying this openly in front of all these people. I can't be fairer than that, can I?'

'No,' Channa said with insolence. 'It is splendid British fair play.'

'You have my word.'

'The word of British gentleman?' The voice held sarcasm.

'For God's sake,' Sloan said. 'You can't bargain with him. Let him bring charges. I'll take my chance.'

'Mr Channa?' Meckiff asked.

'The offer is—unconditional?'

'Yes. I'd like some information, of course. But the offer is unconditional.'

'I accept it.'

'Good.'

'Should we shake hands?'

'It is not necessary.'

'Or seemly?'

'I didn't say that.'

The brown face was sullen. 'There is no information.'

'You disappoint me.'

'Information has already been—imparted.'

'To Mr Sloan?'

'Yes.'

'Is that right, Sloan?'

'Yes.'

'What kind of information?'

'It is in the report,' Sloan said. 'Channa worked the west shore of the lake through the tail of the migrations, using Suru and Wakili tribesmen. It was arranged that they should be paid in fresh meat—one leg from each animal killed; and with certain items of poaching equipment. There were, so he says, about two hundred men in the party.'

'Not four hundred?'

'Four hundred,' Channa said in disgust. 'That is ridiculous.'

'The report from the spotter was exaggerated?'

'I think so,' Sloan said.

'Then what?'

'A rendezvous had been arranged with transport which crossed the steppe from Mirembe to the lake. Channa loaded the hides and trophies and the meat, sent the transport back to Mirembe and then continued through the gorge and into the Suswa Valley. A scheme had been devised whereby the party would split into three separate units, each unit circling back on itself at daily intervals to collect from the traps and snares set by the other two units.'

'Ingenious.'

'It is a common device. The ultimate object was ivory and horn from the lower valley. They would then break out from the valley to the fringe of the Onde Marsh where transport would await them.'

'Further transport?'

'Yes. Channa would use it to take the stuff to Okui.'

'Across the marsh?'

'It is possible to take transport across the marsh for a short period at the end of the dry season when the surface is baked.'

'I see. There would be illegal material at Mirembe and at Okui?'

'Yes.'

'And its destination?'

'Port of Kuru.'

'Interesting,' Meckiff said. 'But not quite the sort of information I need.'

'He wants names,' Channa said. 'Big, important names so that he can swoop and make arrests and gain promotion.' The Welsh voice soared. 'Well, you have had one name, one name which I have had knocked out of me . . .' The eyes swelled with hatred, became lachrymose. 'There will be no more names. Not one more name.'

'A name?' Meckiff said. 'I don't recall . . .' He turned paper. 'I have had no name.'

'No,' Freeland said. 'There is no name. Not in the log or in the report.'

'There was a name,' Channa said softly. 'But I have forgotten it.'

'Sloan,' Meckiff asked. 'What is this about a name?'

'We have made a bargain,' Ram Channa said. 'Let us forget animals and ordinances—and names.'

'Sloan?'

Sloan said: 'I, too, have forgotten.'

Meckiff stared. He had sensed Sloan's latent power in that moment, his intensity. The tone of voice and the expression in the face belied the words. The name is there, he thought; like a brand on the mind. Why haven't you reported it? Why should you hold it secretly in trust to yourself? A name? What kind of name? A name to link the chains of poaching and distribution? An Asian? A European? An African? And where? In Mirembe? Or Okui? Or Arupa? Or Port of Kuru? Sloan smiled at him but there was no warmth in the eyes. He felt an indefinable disquiet. He said heavily: 'Perhaps it is best forgotten.' He watched the rain and the lake in the compound and the rain whipping the lake into troughs so that it was like a miniature sea. He said: 'So you went on—into the valley and with the river. And poor Haggard slung like a carcass between two bamboo poles, the sun in his face.'

With dusk the scouts had not come and the night moved in to enclose them. The dusk was brief and they built a fire and waited for the flux of darkness. It grew beyond the aureole of firelight. The river ran under the darkness, faster here than in the gorge where it had been impeded by cataracts; it ran with the sounds of melancholy. It would be moonrise within the hour and, soon, they saw the sky lighten and the bank of the river and the river itself and then the further bank and the mounting walls of the valley.

Vanrennan said: 'This here river—you think there is rain in the hills?'

'Maybe,' Sloan said. He looked at Haggard. Even the red reflection could not dispel the bloodlessness of the face.

'They won't come,' Haggard said. 'They won't come now.'

'No.'

'Are you sure about the timber?'

'Yes. A man could get lost.'

Ellis looked behind him at the forest. 'I would not go there,' he said nervously. 'Look at it. You could walk and walk and there would be nothing but trees and you would reach the summit of the hills and look down and across and there would still be nothing but trees.' The voice was very quiet, as if it came distantly from behind a curtain. He felt the weariness of his body rise and dull the edge of it so that the words were thick and formless. 'I never liked forests. Even at home I would not go alone into forests. They seem to grow a force of their own: a separate force that exists apart from the life of each of the trees.' He looked at Sloan. 'You know what I mean.'

'Yes.'

'It is easier to imagine evil in a forest than any other force.'

Sloan shook his head. 'There is no evil in the forest. Neither good nor evil. Those things do not exist outside man himself. It is not evil you feel in the forest—but aloofness. And the aloofness comes from yourself. If you stand aloof from the forest you will not survive.'

'I did a jungle-survival course,' Pitt said. 'We all got crabs.'

'Sloan would survive in the forest,' Haggard said. 'That's true, isn't it, Sloan?'

'Yes.'

'Sloan.'

'What?'

'You could take us through the forest.'

'I doubt it.'

'I believe you could do it.'

'No.'

'You have a sense of direction like an animal.'

'It would not get us through the forest.'

Vanrennan said: 'Blue-unction is the thing for crabs. I remember—'

'Oh, pipe down,' Ellis said. The tiredness had welled up suddenly and he began to yawn. He held his hands to the fire, studying them as if their lack of strength would be visible in the light. The tiredness had spread even to the finger-tips. He flexed the fingers, yawned

again. The yawning became uncontrollable and he felt the waves of tiredness take his body like a suffusion of heat. Beneath it was a small pulse of fear. My strength is gone, he told himself: all that walking in the sun . . . perhaps it is heat-stroke. He felt his temples but the flesh was cool. I am tired . . . tired . . .

'I know you could get us through the forest,' Haggard said. 'Something would tell you the way.' The thin voice became urgent. 'I know you could do it.'

'I have a wrist-compass,' Maclaren said.

'West,' Haggard said. 'You said the Forest Station lies west through the timber.'

'But not due west. Only approximately west.'

'It's worth a try.'

'You want to walk forty miles through a forest on an approximate bearing in the hope of striking a small isolated depot?'

'I'd risk it,' Haggard said. 'I'd risk it with you, Sloan.'

'No.'

'Then what's the drill?' Maclaren asked.

'There are now two alternatives. Haggard can be returned through the gorge and across the plain. Or we can continue into the valley after the poachers.'

'Ah, the poachers,' Haggard said faintly. 'I had forgotten the poachers.'

'The poachers are your best chance.'

'You don't really believe that.'

'I believe it. They will have guns, food and transport.'

Haggard's face turned in the firelight. 'They will be thin starved men, a party of nomads perhaps, who will vanish into the bush when we appear and we shall be alone and there will be no doctor.' The face turned again and the shoulders shook in the blanket.

'He could be right,' Maclaren said uneasily.

Vanrennan nodded. 'Those tracks we saw was no army of four hundred men.'

'They must have split.'

'But we don't know that.'

'We don't know anything,' Maclaren said. 'We just go on and on.'

'We go on because we have a job to do,' Sloan said.

'Look, Sloan,' Ellis said. 'We're not professionals. We don't get paid for catching poachers . . .' The words died in a wave of yawning. He lay down by the fire, parallel to Haggard, supported his head on his pack, stared up into the night-sky. He felt puny under its immensity. He closed his eyes, moving immediately to the

boundary of sleep. 'I'm tired,' he said. The words blurred and reverberated. 'Terribly tired. Tired . . .' He heard Sloan say: 'It makes no difference to me. I shall go on.' The word came like a hammer to his brain . . . on . . . on . . . on . . . Maclaren's voice said: 'But you wouldn't split the team, Harry? We have to stick together.' And Sloan's quiet voice asked: 'Did I ever say it needed five men to carry one man on a stretcher? Of course I'll split the team. And if Haggard goes back through the gorge then I'll go on with you, Johnny, and Alan here . . .' The import of the words came sluggishly through this texture of sleep and he sat up, committed now as if some decision had been made during the brief retreat from wakefulness. He said: 'I'm going back tomorrow. I can't go on. I'm tired. Very, very tired.' He touched Vanrennan's arm. 'And so is this sour bastard—if he'd admit it.'

Maclaren said: 'You don't mean that, Harry?'

'I mean it.'

'You'd send Bob and Ren back—alone?'

'Yes.'

'Carry Haggard? Through the gorge and across the plain?'

'You heard Ellis.'

'They'd never make it.'

'I'm going back,' Ellis said. 'I've made up my mind. Nothing could be worse than this terrible valley.'

'Terrible valley?' Pitt repeated. 'How can you say that? It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen.'

'You don't understand,' Ellis said. 'You don't understand because you're a boy, strong and as hard as teak. Your body does what you tell it. You don't know what it is to feel your strength ebb and your knees sag. You don't know what it is to discover, quite suddenly, that the last spark of youth is gone and that there's nothing you can do about it. I'm fifty-five; it's pathetic to be talking about youth. But you'll understand one day that a man carries a kind of illusion about with him, that he holds to it fast. That's good for a laugh, isn't it? An illusion guarded like some sort of possession?' He lay down again, pushed the hot kindling away from him. 'You don't mean to be cruel. But you are. You exhibit your youth, wear it like a kind of gay and glorious flower. You flaunt it and parade it and throw it in our faces. You emphasise it in a hundred different ways. You know what you did today? I'll tell you . . .' He watched rain-clouds obscure the moon. 'We were walking together, you and I. Sloan was in front, the others behind. It was very hot but suddenly you increased pace. You were telling me something but you increased

pace and you left me, still talking, mind you, and the river bank rose into dunes and you climbed them very fast and stood at the top, waiting. You watched me labour up the slope and when I slipped at your feet you did not put your hand down to help me and there was a sort of contempt on your face. A little thing, isn't it? And you don't even remember it. But you, too, are pathetic—because you think you have it for ever.' He turned on his elbow, stared at Maclaren. 'You don't laugh so much these days, Mac.'

Pitt said: 'This fire-observation post.'

'What about it?'

'It is manned, isn't it?'

'It should be.'

'You're not certain, Harry?'

'No.'

'They'd see a fire, wouldn't they?'

Sloan smiled. 'That's the general idea.'

'Well, why not start one?'

'This boy got brains,' Vanrennan said.

'It'd be certain to bring them down.'

'Have to be a good 'un,' Maclaren said.

'Plenty of smoke——'

'—and they'd be down in no time.'

'Wait,' Sloan said.

'You have objections?'

'I've no objections—provided you watch the timber and the grazing.'

'The timber and the grazing,' Vanrennan said drily. 'There's a bloke here headed straight for a wooden leg and you talk about the timber and the grazing.'

'We don't have to start a bush fire,' Maclaren said. 'Just a nice careful burn with lots of smoke.'

'You'd still be lucky,' Sloan said.

'How so?'

'I never yet found a post with anyone there when I needed help.'

'We ought to try,' Ellis said. The tiredness had returned and he closed his eyes, listened to the fall of ash within the fire. Then he opened them again and stared into the heart of the fire, at its red-white surfaces changing in the fingers of the wind as if lights of differing intensity were flickering there. He was grateful for its heat and it seemed that the glare and the heat fell around and over him and fortified him against the moony wilderness. He yawned and the fire, then, was darkly crimson behind the membrane of his

cyclids and he heard their voices slur and merge into the sounds of wind and river and the nearer sound of burning wood.

'At sunrise,' Sloan said, 'we moved off: myself, Maclaren and Pitt. It had been arranged that Ellis and Vanrennan would maintain a fire on the river bank until noon. Then, if no help came from the timber, they were to head for the gorge.'

'Only until noon? Was that sufficient time?'

'Not really. But the rains were ready to break and I told them they must get through Staedtler's Gorge before the river rose. I left them the rifle and the cartridges, a water-bottle, matches, two blankets, Johnny's compass and some of the biltong we'd prepared.'

'And off you went?'

'Yes.'

'Unarmed?'

'Yes.'

Freeland said: 'You actually proposed to arrest, unarmed, a large armed poaching party?'

'I had no alternative.'

'My dear Sloan——'

'I have done it before.'

'You are telling me that, on previous occasions, you have arrested poachers unarmed?'

'Frequently.'

'Why?'

'It saves—accidents.'

'I don't understand you.'

'He means,' Meckiff said, 'that there are times when he would not trust himself with a rifle in his hands.' He turned from the casement, stared at Sloan. The face was calm above the pipe, the eyes without passion. One could not readily imagine passion, he thought; the face bearded and still and the pipe gripped in the side-teeth and the man projecting a kind of tranquillity. He felt wariness again, sensed the pressures which continuously generated within Sloan. 'And Haggard?' he asked. 'What did Haggard say about this?'

'He lay there silently,' Ellis said. 'He seemed to have—lost heart.'

'He said nothing?'

'No.'

'He did not object or protest?'

'No.'

'Strange.'

'It's not so strange,' Pitt said. 'He wanted Sloan.'

'But he distrusted Sloan, blamed him for his predicament.'

'Perhaps. But if he lost heart it was because Sloan left him.'

'He needed Sloan?'

'I am sure of it.'

'Sloan,' Meckiff said. 'Did Haggard speak to you that night?'

Sloan withdrew the pipe, stroked its stem. 'No,' he said. 'He did not speak.'

He could not tell of those words by the river. Already they lay in some submerged region of the mind which he could not reveal or surrender. He had tended the fire, then walked from the bivouac and along the bank and through the dunes until he could no longer see the reflection of the fire or smell the scent of it and there was only the bank shelving to the moon-pale river and the rampart of the forest rising in black serrations until the crowns found outline on the paling sky. There was wind on the river, wind in the trees, wind in the sky; he listened to its sough, watched the scud of cloud and the shadows of the cloud on the river and it seemed that the night was in motion, moving with the river. It was the river which had drawn him, the river which expressed the age and purity of the valley. He walked to the lip of the bank, stared across the tangle of rushes. It was low and he could see the roots of mangroves, the river in their arching tunnels. He had come because he needed solitude, leaving the bivouac and its sleeping men for a condition of aloneness which was essential to him. He stayed until the cold off the river caused him to shiver. He returned to the bivouac. Haggard stirred.

'You're awake, then?'

'Yes.'

'The leg?'

'It's on fire.'

He touched the face, feeling the heat of the flesh transmit immediately to his finger-tips. 'Is it painful?'

'Very.'

'Should I loosen the bandage?'

'It wouldn't stop the pain.'

'Would you like a drink?'

Haggard nodded and he supported the head, gave him water. The nape of the neck was hot against his hand. 'You're burning up.'

Haggard drank slowly. 'Tastes queer. Is it full of bugs?'

'Bound to be.'

'Where have you been?'

'Upstream.'

'It looks nice with the moon on it.'

'Yes.'

'I always liked water with the moon on it. Especially the sea—when there's a swell running and the waves are coming down the path of the moon.'

Sloan smiled.

'Doesn't sound like me, does it?'

'No.'

'I keep thinking about water. Cold flowing water.'

'That's because of——'

'The fever?'

'Yes.'

'It won't stop throbbing.'

He wetted his handkerchief, placed it on the forehead.

'I heard Vanrennan,' Haggard said.

'Vanrennan?'

'About the wooden leg.'

'Forget it.'

Haggard smiled suddenly. 'Do they have policemen with wooden legs?'

Sloan stared.

'It's no joke, is it?'

'Try to sleep.'

'The river seems—faster.'

'That's the effect of the moonlight.'

'No, it isn't that. It really is faster. Listen . . .'

They listened and they heard the river in the bank.

'You hear it?'

'If there is rain up north,' Sloan said, 'you'll have to move sharp tomorrow. By noon at the latest.'

'It sounds lovely.'

'The river?'

'Yes. All that water from the hills—perhaps even from the mountains. Cold mountain water . . .'

'It's tepid. And it's thick with mosquito larvae.'

'No,' Haggard said. 'It's cold, with bits of ice from the glaciers still floating in it.'

Sloan smiled. 'And you can see the last of the snow lying in drifts in the trees.'

'Yes, lovely.'

'And there's actually an ice-floe coming down.'

'With a polar-bear on it?'

'Two.'

'Sloan.'

'Yes?'

'Don't joke any more.'

'All right.'

'I keep thinking of the river and the leg, the river and the leg—and it hurts and it's terribly hot . . .'

'I'll move it out the fire.'

'You said you wouldn't joke.'

'All right.'

'Will you do something for me?'

'What?'

'Take me down to the river.'

'You mean away from the camp?'

'I mean away from the camp and down the bank to the water.'

'Yes. I'll do that.'

'I want to——'

'Well?'

'I want to lie with my leg in the cold running water.'

'That wouldn't help.'

'I'm burning up.'

'Yes. But it wouldn't help.'

'Do as I say, Sloan. Please.'

'I can't do that. What would happen?'

'Nothing will happen. Look at the river—the silver lights in it. I want to lie there, let it flow over my leg.'

He bent, lifted Haggard so that the blanket was retained. He felt his fragility; the body lay lightly across his arms and it was like an injured bird held in the hands—a tenuous life fluttering and the sudden fear that it could not be sustained. He left the circle of radiation and the heat of the fire retreated and they felt the wind and the cold of the river in it. Haggard's arms encircled his neck and he bore him down the dune to where the bank had broken. His feet sank in crumbled river sand. The river eddied into the hollow and there were tresses of vegetation tapering on the current. He bent again but Haggard did not relinquish his grasp. 'All right,' he said. 'I've got you'; but the arms continued to hold his neck and the thin voice said urgently in his ear: 'Don't leave me, Sloan. Not with Ellis and Vanrennan.' He said: 'I have to leave you. You know I have to leave you.' The voice said: 'I'm afraid. I don't trust them. Please take me with you, Sloan. Please, please, please . . .' He allowed the weight to rest on the sand, still bending and the arms about his

neck. He felt their heat, the heat of the face, the heat and the smell of sickness on the breath. 'Don't fret,' he said and he heard a small whimper of pain when the leg touched the sand. The arms tightened in response, then withdrew. He stood and Haggard looked up at him and he said: 'You know I can't take you.'

A nightjar called and the sound came with an immense melancholy, a part of the wind and the forest and the river. It called again, distant now. He could see that Haggard listened and it called again and it was so distant that it was like a voice beneath them, from a well so deep that it could not be reached. He saw that the sound had significance for Haggard and when it called for the third time it was faint and weak as if a life had expired in the night. Haggard turned his face to the wall of the bank.

Sloan said: 'Shall I take you back?'

'No.'

'You'll be cold.'

'No.'

'You ought to go back.' He watched brushwood pass on the breast of the river, measuring its pace against the reeds on the farther bank. He said: 'It is faster.'

'Help me to the edge, Sloan.'

'You mean it?'

'Pleace.'

He placed him on the shallow lip so that the leg lay obliquely in the water. Then he sat, slightly behind in order to support the back. He watched the bandage swell with water and the current take one of the long frayed ends and elongate it on the surface.

Haggard said: 'It's a good river. You can feel a kind of secret life quickening.'

'Yes. I'm sure it's filling.'

'It's a good valley, too.'

'Yes.'

'It means a lot to you, doesn't it?'

'I guess so.'

'Tell me why.'

'There's something here, something we had once; something we lost or threw away.'

'Innocence?'

'Perhaps.'

'Is that important to you?'

'Yes.'

'You can't bear the thought of poachers in the valley, can you?'

'No.'

'Men coming here with avarice in their hearts, to kill for money.
... It soils it for you, doesn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Did you hear the bird calling?'

'The nightjar?'

'Yes. The nightjar.'

'I heard it.'

'It upset me.'

'I know.'

'But you don't know. It came from a long way off and when the cry drowned in the noise of the river I felt—abandoned.'

'I knew that.'

'Suddenly afraid. But not only for myself. *You* were a part of it.'

'We are all part of it.'

'No, I don't mean that. You're in danger, Sloan.'

'What kind of danger?'

Haggard turned. The face was wan in moonlight, the eyes anxious.
'You don't understand, do you?'

'No.'

'It's difficult to express.'

'Try it.'

'You have a name for an animal that sets itself apart from the herd.'

'A rogue?'

'Yes. A rogue. What happens to him?'

Sloan smiled. 'He lives alone.'

'Is that all?'

'Well, he grows a terrible temper.'

'He becomes savage?'

'Maybe.'

'In that case he is marked for destruction?'

'Yes. But not by his own kind.'

Haggard allowed his hand to drift on the current. 'The effect is the same.'

'Yes.'

'You can't survive, Sloan.'

'I'll survive.'

'You can't possibly survive. They'll destroy you.'

'I doubt it.'

'In one sense you're like these animals—born for natural rhythms of living; sun, simple needs, freedom.'

'Sounds fine.'

'But you're not simple. You're a man. You're enormously complex. You can't jump backward in time.'

'If only one could.'

'There's too much in between.'

'Yes. Too much in between. One can only preserve, fight for that with all one's strength.'

'They'll destroy you.'

'So they destroy me. I can't give more than that, can I?' He felt the tremor in Haggard's body move into his shoulder. 'You're shivering.' He stood, looked down into the upturned face. Then he bent so that his arms were under the shoulders and thighs, taking the weight and then straightening. He felt the bandage catch on some projection below the bank and the sudden resistance of the leg. Haggard cried in pain and the leg came from the water and the body was against his own and he felt the impulses of pain moving up through the body. 'God, dear God,' Haggard whispered. 'God, God, God . . .' Water from the saturated bandage ran across his leg and he heard it puddling the earth and he said: 'It's all right. Easy. It's all right.' Haggard's anguish was shuddering against him and the cheek was wet with tears and he heard the anguish in the throat and he said, trembling: 'I'm sorry for what I've done to you, sorry for the leg, sorry for you, sorry for everything I've done . . .' Cloud left the moon and he saw the river and its bloom of white pure light and the crown of the forest running now in an endless silver nap and he turned, walked across the bank and up the ramp of sand and Haggard's cheek was pressed against his own, their tears intermingling, and he heard Haggard say: 'Tom . . . Tom's my name. . . .' He walked carefully, stopping once to shift the weight. It was like a burden he would never lose.

Meckiff said again: 'Are you certain you did not speak to each other?'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'Certain. We did not speak.'

4

ELLIS SAID: 'WE WAITED until high noon. The fire had been fed with wet brush since dawn and there had been a column of smoke for the whole of that morning. But no one came. It had been a very

conspicuous fire but no one came. Toward noon there was a gathering of rain-cloud and it became humid and we knew the rains were near. We doused the fire.' He paused, looking back to that moment. It had been a bad moment. The last pillar of upflung smoke had broken on the sky and they watched it dissolve and the breeze cast it away in dark stains; the sky was suddenly unsmirched above them and there was no movement except the slow billow of cumulus, no bird-song to break the stillness; nothing but the glare of sun on sand and water and the muted sound of the river. They felt the valley close around them like a trap and the terrible emptiness of the forest and they knew there had never been the slightest hope of help emerging from the forest and they lifted the stretcher and moved off down the crumbling footprints of the days before. 'It was all right at first. We made good progress and the going was fair—firm level sand and a good breeze off the river. We went well and, later, we stopped and drank some water and ate some of the disgusting bits of dried meat Sloan had given us.'

'And Haggard?'

'He would not eat. He had a sip or two of water. But that was all.'

'Did he complain?'

'No. He said very little, only that he could not eat the meat. He looked ill. He looked awfully ill. There was something different about him. He seemed to have moved away, to be not quite there with us. I began to wonder if more than a crippled leg was at stake.'

'He gave up,' Vanrennan said, with contempt.

'No,' Ellis said. 'I don't think he gave up. I think he was—oppressed; that enormous forest and the loneliness and only the sky to look at, the odd bird of prey circling. And he knew that the gorge and the plain lay ahead.' He turned to stare at Vanrennan. 'What right have you to sneer? How can you possibly know what it is like to be injured in such circumstances? A crushed leg in the heart of a wilderness and no doctor or drugs or dressings, not even the reassurance of early aid? How can you know? All he could do was lie there with that dreadful injury obsessing his mind, knowing that——'

'Knowing what?' Meckiff asked.

'Well, it was getting worse.'

'The pain?'

'No. It wasn't that. I had a feeling about him. The leg was bandaged with a torn-up shirt from Sloan's pack and even in that heat he kept himself covered with the blanket. One could see only the face and the hands gripping the bamboo poles. It's difficult to

explain but one felt that one might strip the bandage and remove the blanket and find that changes were taking place, that he was deteriorating. That evening——

'Wait,' Meckiff said. 'Let us not hurry into the evening. There is Sloan to consider. The adventure into Sloan's private paradise.' The voice was ironic. 'Have you heard that phrase before, Sloan?'

'I have heard it.'

'That is what they name the Suswa Valley.'

'And it is a good name,' Pitt said evenly.

'Lieutenant?'

'It is a paradise.'

'Possibly. But it is not Mr Sloan's private estate.'

'A pity.'

'You think so?'

'Yes. Don't you?'

'No.'

Pitt said, with anger: 'Let us give it away, then. Let us give it to the poachers and the hunters and the tourists so that the game may be butchered; to the blacks who will work the land into erosion and burn the grazing and whose idea of forestry is to cut down an ancient tree in order that one of the smaller of its branches may be made into the handle of a hoe. Let us do that. But for Christ's sake don't deliver it to the Harry Sloans of this world who will guard it and preserve it so that a little beauty is left——'

'The dawn,' Meckiff interrupted. 'The dawn of that day.'

Pitt turned from him. He had spoken and it seemed that his words rebounded from a number of impenetrable surfaces. Sloan smiled but the other faces were without comprehension. Heenan stroked his silver hair, began to sketch idly in the corner of the pad. It was one of those moments, he knew, when a truth enters and establishes itself in the mind; small at first, then suddenly significant. He looked again at Meckiff but the face was thick and insensitive and he searched the eyes for some pinprick of illumination. He felt shocked and empty. Indifference, then, was the true enemy? They had turned away from beauty, saw no value in it. Perhaps the spirit of man did not even need it. He said: 'I knew the smoke would be ineffective. I looked back once and I could hardly see it. The valley seemed to fall across it and conceal it. A few feathers of dark-grey smoke on the sky—that was all. Later, we could not see even that. We followed the river. The lower valley opens into a natural basin and it is here that the river widens to form a long narrow lake.'

It was here, he could have said, that the valley claimed him; that he was committed irrevocably to its defence; that he moved so close to Sloan that he saw through Sloan's eyes, felt Sloan's pain, suffered vicariously the weight of Sloan's responsibility. Haggard and his plight retreated. Somewhere downstream the odorous leg would be leaving the valley on its primitive litter. It had no relevance to them. The air of the valley was sweet, the stench of sickness an offence. He found it easy to dismiss Haggard. He was in his twentieth year and all pain, disease and imperfection was repugnant to him.

It was here, in the lower reach of the valley, that he became truly aware of its wealth of wild creatures. They were harmonies in a pattern of natural beauty: the pattern expanding and repeating itself as the valley unfolded and each creature an insert, dark, light or tawny, in its infinite gradations. These half-revealed shapes, sometimes so integrated with sunlight and colour that he sensed rather than saw them, were, he knew, the visible fringe of an immense but unseen congregation. He felt the purity of the valley. This was no artificial pocket of land shared uneasily by man and beast. It was *their* domain.

He said with deliberate triteness: 'It's a pretty place. Very quiet. And lots of lovely animals who don't seem to realise they are commercial properties.'

'No,' Sloan said seriously. 'But now they are learning fear.' He stared at Ram Channa. 'They are learning about man and that he wears bright green turbans and bright gold teeth and that there is nothing he will not do, no bestiality he will not perpetrate in order to rob and strip them of—'

'Sloan,' Freeland said. 'You will do well not to antagonise Mr Channa—'

'Antagonise? Do you know what we found later that day? It began with the carcasses of forty elephant. They had been trapped in fire-rings, then killed. Many were immature, some in calf. The meat had been left—but everything else had gone; tusks, feet, the tails and the tips of trunks. Further down—another twenty-eight. And, later, another thirty carcasses and seven live calves dying in the river with burned hides. God knows how many had fled to the bush and were lying up burned and desperate. But this was only the beginning. Every game-track had been set with snares. Pits had been dug and staked at intervals along the water. There were fences and traps and the bodies of animals mutilated by home-made guns. They had killed without discrimination, discarding that which they did not want. We found the tracks of scores of men and places where

they had been joined by other parties of men and everywhere was this evidence of slaughter and bits of paper and wire and human excrement and scavengers picking over the remains.' He leaned toward Ram Channa. 'You dirty pig . . . to bring your filth into the valley.' The Asian grinned with hatred. 'Animals reduced to dice and billiard-balls and umbrella-stands and rugs and fly-whisks and coats for the backs of tarts and potions for Indian lechers . . . Don't you realise what you are doing, man? Don't you care——?'

'Sloan,' Meckiff reminded him.

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'We followed the river and at every bend we came upon the signs of the killing. We found the tyre-tracks of a lorry and, further, the tracks of a smaller truck. It was well organised. Everything of value would be transported, sold or bartered. Then, toward dusk, at the point where we planned to bivouac, we found the net. It stretched for at least a half-mile and it had been used to trap a large herd of mixed antelope.' He knocked charred tobacco from his pipe and hot red fragments fell to the floor. 'They were still there.'

'Entangled?'

'No. They had been released from the net.'

'But you say they were still there?'

'They were still there because they had been hamstrung. I estimated about sixty head. The hindleg tendons had been cut and they could not move without dragging. The intention, of course, was to preserve the meat in the living animal.'

Meckiff nodded. 'And that meant——?'

'Yes. It meant they would return. It meant we would wait.'

Meckiff said: 'To me it is all incredible. Here we have Ellis and Vannan struggling through the gorge with poor Haggard. And you, Sloan, you and Pitt and Maclaren going deeper into the valley; moving away in distance when you had such need of each other.'

'Yes,' Ellis said. 'But it is not so incredible when you understand the man, his motive.' He pointed with his cigarette at Sloan. 'People don't matter to him. He simply doesn't care about them. He is concerned with abstractions; paradise, heritage, posterity.' He smiled superciliously. 'Posterity. He is the guardian of something this unborn multitude may not even want.' He looked at Meckiff for approval, searching this thickened face which contained all the strength and resolution he knew himself to lack. The fingers had gone again to the line of medal-ribbon and he watched their slow stroking movement with the greasy colours appearing and dis-

appearing under the fingers; these colours which were also the colours of bravery. He saw Meckiff's mouth widen slightly in response. David, he remembered; David is his name. Perhaps one day . . . ? Friendship could burgeon from unlikely soils. He said confidently, speaking directly to Meckiff: 'He told us we would clear the gorge within a day. We left at noon but by dusk we had not even entered the gorge. It had begun well: but gradually——' The face nodded in sympathy. He wanted to confess his weaknesses. This strong policeman would understand. 'Gradually,' he said, 'it became an ordeal.'

There was no cover on the river bank and they moved through the heat of a vertical sun. Vanrennan had taken the head of the stretcher and he could see the Afrikaner's burned neck and the bristles of white hair under the felt hat and the way in which the shoulders were pulled down by the weight of the stretcher. He realised for the first time that Vanrennan was a small man, that the back was narrow, the shoulders as slight and sharp-boned as Haggard's. He had never seen Vanrennan with such clarity. The neck was thin, the flesh tight on the nape and patterned with criss-cross lines as if it had been faintly cut with a knife. An old man's neck, he thought. The thought gave him satisfaction. Small, skinny and ageing. But it was strange that he had not seen this before. Vanrennan, he knew, had created his own image. There had been much talk of hardship and endurance and the early pioneering days: of existence in primitive places: of challenges met and obstacles overcome: there had been much handling of guns and ammo and oil-bottles and pull-throughs, the spotted hands always contriving to give an appearance of expertise. He said to the straining back: 'You lost your bed-roll.'

'I done what?'

'You lost your bed-roll when the truck went.' Then, mockingly: 'You know—the one you used to lie on in jungles and deserts, counting the stars.'

Vanrennan did not answer.

'And the gun. That lovely Purdey your Daddy gave you. That went too.'

'Why don't you save your breath, Ellis?'

He smiled. Vanrennan could not turn and for some reason seemed defenceless. He said: 'I'm glad I've got a dead shot like you. We're going to need some fresh meat soon. I'm no good with a gun. But you: they say you can knock the eye out of a pigeon at three hundred yards.'

'I could knock *your* bloody eye out from right here.'

The tiredness had reclaimed him at that moment. It had lain traitorously in his bones and muscles and he felt it spread in its slow languid way and draw the strength from his joints. The rifle knocked against his hip and he stopped and Vanrennan leaned for a moment with the dandy stretched between them. Vanrennan said: 'You going to stop again you just tell me, eh?'

'It's the rifle.'

'What about it?'

'I've carried it two hours.'

'So?'

'It's your turn.'

'We're taking turns?'

'Shouldn't we take turns?'

They lowered the stretcher and Haggard shielded his eyes against the sun. Ellis hesitated. Then he moved so that his shadow fell across Haggard's face.

Vanrennan said: 'We could put the rifle on the stretcher.'

'All right,' Ellis said. He unslung the rifle, wedged it beneath the bamboo pole against the sound leg. He stared in dismay. 'Damn!'

'What's up?'

'The blankets have gone.'

'Gone?'

'They were folded on the end. They must've fallen.' He turned, peered through mists of heat. He could see the crust of broken sand and the deep black indents of their feet and a thicket of reeds across his vision where the river wound. 'I can't see them,' he said.

'We been going two hours,' Vanrennan said.

'Yes.'

'Could be anywhere.'

'Yes. Anywhere.'

'We can't just leave them.'

'But if they're two hours back——'

'We need those blankets, Ellis.'

'Yes. I know.' Ellis studied the river and its glaring bank.

Vanrennan said impatiently: 'Well, they in't going to pop up all of a sudden, are they?'

'They may not be far back,' Haggard said.

'We'll toss for it,' Vanrennan said.

He had lost, of course; and they had taken Haggard away from the bank to the shade of papyrus and he had begun the walk back: into the face of the sun and along the broken trail. It had been a walk

of unbearable aloneness. Behind the sounds of the river and his thrusting boots he sensed the stillness of the valley. He walked into this stillness of sun and river-murmur and the sweat ran unpleasantly in his groin and the heat entered and inflamed him so that even thought was inhibited and there was only the river and the boots and a constant image of Vanrennan drinking water in the shadow of pale dipping feathers. He found the blankets after forty minutes and he gathered them, turned. The sun fell across his shoulders and he felt it burn into the material of his shirt, probe for the skin. Soon, the river and the faint rasp of insects retreated and he heard only the inner, desperate sounds of his blood and lungs. He stopped three times on the return and his limbs moved slowly as if through a weight of water and when he rejoined Haggard and Vanrennan he cast the blankets from him and lay under the papyrus in heaving weakness.

'I'd become terribly tired,' he told Meckiff. 'All that wasted effort in the heat . . . But I was thankful, later, that I'd retrieved the blankets. It was cold by the river that night. A wind seemed to come straight from the bitter rock of the gorge. We could hear the wind in the gorge—a kind of booming noise. It brought the sound of the rapids. There was something ominous about it. It was like listening to a distant cauldron. Something seemed to be simmering there and I got up and went down to the river. There was a good moon and the river looked fast in the moonlight and I put my hand in the water and I could feel a pressure against it, a sort of urgency. It was no longer placid. It frightened me and I went back and woke Vanrennan. Haggard was awake, staring up at the sky as usual. "The pain's gone," he said. "Never mind that," I said. "The river's running fast. It's on the rise." Vanrennan went down and when he came back he said: "Yes. It's on the rise. We'll leave at first light." I couldn't sleep again. I sat over the fire and fed it with bits of brushwood and my back was cold from the wind. I sat there and listened to the river and the boiling noises in the heart of the gorge.'

Pitt said: 'We were listening that night. But not to the wind or the river. We were listening to sixty animals with slit tendons. We could hear them dragging about in the darkness and when the moon rose we saw their shapes looking grey and crippled in the light. We could not sleep.' He looked at Sloan with compassion. 'Sloan was roaming about for half the night. I left my blanket once to find him and he passed me without seeing me and his face was——' He stared into Meckiff's expressionless eyes. 'Don't you understand

what I'm saying? This suffering, this herd of suffering beasts . . .' The eyes did not alter. 'Don't you see what I mean? He could do nothing to help them. He had no rifle, no weapon to kill them, nothing . . .' The words were rebounding again. He felt the beginning of desperation. Meckiff was more than a policeman, more than an inquisitor. Meckiff stood there like some emissary from an unpitiful world. He felt the power of this immense force of indifference. It lay behind Meckiff. It had produced him and thrust him into this humid room to excavate their love, pity and hungers and strip these things of meaning. 'You,' he said, putting contempt into the word. 'You have brought Sloan here to destroy him. Well, I will tell you something. Haggard had gone—and he was going to his death. Perhaps we could have saved him. I don't know. We were waiting by a river in a quiet valley for men who were coming to savage and despoil it. And it was right that we were there. *Right.*' He turned from Meckiff to the window and he watched a truck enter the compound and the lake break into a long even wave from the slewing of the truck. Two men got out. They wore oilskins and when their heads bent the water runnelled from the brims of their hats and the rain stood on the shoulders of the oilskins and when the faces lifted they were the faces of Quinn and the American, Krebs. He looked at Meckiff and he saw that Meckiff checked his watch; as if the men had come by appointment. He heard a door open and shut, the sound of boots boisterously scraped on mats, Quinn's thick voice somewhere at the flank of the veranda. Meckiff smiled and the eyes were secret.

Ellis said: 'We were away before sunrise. Haggard refused to eat. He asked me to bathe his face so I soaked my handkerchief in the river and washed him. The fever had gone but there was a kind of vacant look in his eyes which I did not like.'

'And the leg?' Meckiff asked.

'He said it did not hurt. The pain had gone with the fever. It felt numb, he said; but it wasn't throbbing and he preferred it like that. He drank some water and he allowed me to comb his hair for him. He asked me if we'd get through the gorge that day and I said: Yes, we'll get through the gorge and into the plain and it won't be long before . . . But I couldn't forget his leg, this lack of feeling. I lifted the blanket and I could see his foot below the bandage and the toes had a grey sodden look to them. It scared me and I said: Let me wash the leg for you. Let me wash the bandage and dry it in the sun and dress the leg again and make it clean and comfy. Let me do that, I said . . .'

'No,' Vanrennan said. 'We got no time.' He felt the fingers grip and hold his shoulder and, unaccountably, he could not bear the Afrikaner's touch. He knocked the hand away. 'It ought to be done,' he said.

'You seen that river?'

'Yes.'

'We got to get through the gorge.'

'Ten minutes won't make much difference.'

'No? You ever seen the flash-floods there? A man could die in them ten minutes.' He stared at the ragged khaki bandage. 'And a pint or so of river-water won't make much difference neether.'

'All the same——'

'You take the end of that stretcher, Ellis.'

He had not seen the morning light reveal the river; or the mist and the dark places of the night drawn and dissipated by the sun. He marched, eyes downcast, watching his boots plod between the bamboo handles. The weakness rose again and he felt the tremor in his thighs and wrists. He was grateful for the first warmth of the sun; it seemed to bring a brief rekindling of energy. But, soon, the warmth became heat and the familiar burn touched the flesh and the sun-heat drew the strength from him as it had drawn the mists from the river. He became afraid of this growing ferocity. It entered his bowels to create small pockets of nausea which came spasmodically to his throat. It was like a distant enemy concentrating a kind of malevolence upon him. He said to Vanrennan's back: 'We should have marched through the night. There was a good moon.'

Vanrennan did not answer.

'A good moon,' he said again. The moon was enormously distant, a part of another universe. The moon: the image would not leave him; it swung within his head like an orb of ice on the end of a pendulum. He saw it in all its unattainable, glacial coldness. It swung in harmony with his boots. He licked his lips, spat. He raised his head and stared at the sun until he winced and the burn of it inflamed his cheeks. Then he inclined his head again but the sun remained there, a shaking focus of heat at the back of his eyes, eclipsing the face of the cold white moon, melting it. He shut his eyes, opened them, looked sideways at the river. Silly, he rebuked himself; to stare at the sun like that. A bad moment . . . He began to count his feet, this alternate thrust and retraction which was linked to the pulse of blood and the catch of breath. I will not look up, he decided, until I have counted a thousand boots. The boots came and went: they were disembodied now, propelled by some

rhythmic machine, coming and going, building this growing total within his head . . . the sun and the moon and the boots and the numbers revolving in a heavy red haze . . . He looked up when he reached the thousand but the head of the gorge had retreated into distance; it was filmed with heat and he could not even see the details of its structure. He felt a spasm of nausea, the sudden fear that his bowels would void. He began to count again, seeing the numerals quite clearly as if they were each branded momentarily on some hot surface within his brain——

'You gone crazy?' Vanrennan asked, without turning.

'Crazy?'

'You were counting.'

'Was I?'

'What were you counting—sheep?'

'Boots.'

The total had left his head. He could not recall it. It was somewhere in the two hundreds. He stared at Vanrennan's back, aware of an enormous resentment.

'You better put your nut in the river,' Vanrennan said.

He would begin again, he decided. Whatever he had counted—two, three hundred yards—it was that much to the credit; two or three hundred yards further down this endless glaring river. He began again, beginning with the left boot because everything he did was begun with the left; the lacing of shoes, the buttoning of shirt-cuffs, the shaving of his face . . . But he wasn't left-handed. Now that was a strange thing. The total had gone again. The numbers drowned in this hot red syrup that seethed inside his head. He looked at the river and the sand-bars and the hedges of papyrus and the hill-bamboo that grew in socketed yellow stems up to where the juniper began. He could not hear the cataracts. He stared at Vanrennan's back again, watching the damp shirt stick and come away and crease with the movement of the back, the neck-hairs white on the scorched neck. He felt his hatred grow. He pushed gently at the poles so that the stretcher went forward into Vanrennan's back. The body lurched.

'Easy,' Vanrennan said.

Ellis smiled. It had been sufficient to break the rhythm of Vanrennan's pace. Cocky Dutch bastard, he said silently to the darkening back. He slowed abruptly and the stretcher lifted and Vanrennan's arms came backward and the heels sank in sand. 'Sorry,' he said, with insincerity. Haggard had opened his eyes at these changes in rhythm. The face was pallid in the shadow cast by Vanrennan's

body. The blanket had ridden up and he could see the five grey toes with their bits of dirty-yellow nail and the strange dead texture of the flesh. 'Are we near the gorge?' Haggard asked.

Ellis nodded. The walls of the valley were rising and there were sharp contrasts of light and shadow but the river wound and he could not even see the head of the gorge. 'Yes,' he lied. 'Getting near now.' A sense of impotence rose and he pushed with the handles and Vanrennan stumbled and the stretcher tipped and Haggard gasped with fright.

Vanrennan stopped, turned his head. The skin of the neck divided into deep folds. He said: 'You did that deliberate.'

Ellis smiled.

'Put the stretcher down.'

They placed the stretcher on the sand and Vanrennan bent, took the rifle and one of the blankets.

'What are you doing?' Ellis said.

'Doing? I'm sodding off. That's what I'm doing.'

'You don't mean that.'

'No?' Vanrennan examined the magazine, slung the rifle. 'So long, mate.'

Ellis followed him. 'Wait,' he said. 'Please wait.'

Vanrennan halted. 'You got something to say?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

'I'm sorry.'

'How sorry?'

Ellis saw the cruelty in the eyes. But they were dark with fatigue and the lines of exhaustion ran deep from nose to mouth. He's as tired as I am, he thought.

'How sorry?'

'Very sorry. Very, very sorry.'

'Well, it in't near good enough.' Vanrennan removed his hat, wiped his forehead, replaced it.

'It's my head,' Ellis explained. 'It's hot, bursting . . .' He was afraid and he knew he could not overcome this fear, that he needed Vanrennan, that he had to humiliate himself before Vanrennan. 'And my stomach,' he said. 'I think I have dysentery.' He searched for some sign of relenting but the eyes seemed only to stare and find his weakness. 'Stay with us,' he said. 'Don't leave us alone.'

'Say please.'

'Please.'

'Okay. But watch it. Just watch it.'

'I'll watch it.'

'You better put that head in the river.'

He nodded. He had surrendered to Vanrennan. He went down the bank, knelt, immersed his head. He heard the pulse of the river in his ears and he felt it pull and draw his hair along the current and he opened his eyes and saw the white bed shelving down into pale-brown shadow and the leaning lemon stalks of vegetation. He withdrew his head, stood. The water ran from his hair and down his neck and he tasted the sweetness of the river in his mouth. He looked at the river and he saw that his hat had fallen from the bank, ran downstream on the current.

'Don't you like that hat?' Vanrennan asked.

He watched it saturate, begin to sink. He felt suddenly hopeless. This terrible country took everything. His strength, his money, his pride; even his hat. He tied four careful knots in the corners of his handkerchief, stretched it across his head. The hat sank. At that moment he saw the waterbuck. 'Look,' he whispered, and Vanrennan turned and he said: 'You ought to pot it. Fresh meat . . .'

'Fresh meat,' he said to Meckiff, with irony. 'Fresh meat. The buck was no more than a hundred yards downstream and it was standing at the water's edge. A simple shot, you'd say? A simple shot a dead-eye Afrikaner could take with his eyes shut? Well, I will tell you. He crouches on one knee and he pulls down the brim of his hat and he fits the gun nicely into his shoulder and the wily old hunter's face sets in a granite mask and all that bloody tosh and then . . .' Ellis smiled. 'He squeezes the trigger—but nothing happens. And you know why? The safety-catch is on. This famous Dutch marksman is actually firing with the safety on. In the meantime the buck has time to drink, admire its reflection, scratch its neck with its hind leg and walk up the bank and out of sight. He says nothing and he fiddles with the hammer of the rifle and we walk further down the river. And there we see several more waterbuck. Not very distant. An easy shot, you'd say, for a sniper like this one. But what happens? I will tell you. He crouches again and we go through the same old ham performance and this time he actually manages to make the bullet come from the end of the rifle. It is a fine shot, placed with great cunning into a sandy hummock at least six feet to the left of the nearest buck. "It is the sun," he says. "The sun in my eyes." But, of course, it isn't that at all.' Ellis pointed at Vanrennan. 'The truth is that he is a fake. He is living on some kind of legend that he has created for himself. The man-of-the-bush—and all the fake acces-

sories that go with that kind of rot; patched shirts and antique veldt-boots, battered hats with bullet-holes in the brim, handsome guns with secret marks on the stocks. And the camp-fire talk—those yarns of red-blood ancestry and the stern old Daddy with the patriarch's face and the sjambok in the horny hands. And the speech—the quaint ox-wagon dialect he cultivates as part of the legend ...' He walked over to Vanrennan, looked down at him. 'Do you really think this fools us? Do you think we can't get the wind of a fake like you?' He walked back to Meckiff, the hands working nervously. 'All this absurd pretence, this masquerade. I will tell you what I have found. He is not a cash-crop farmer scrabbling for a living from a few hundred acres like me and the Maclarens; he has wide agricultural interests and the best pedigree herds in the Territory. He is not a half-bred Boer raised on gun-oil and axle-grease; but a man with a degree from a Cape university. And his Daddy, as he calls him, was a merchant banker in Pretoria.' He wiped his mouth, unbuttoned his jacket, buttoned it again. Meckiff's eyes were soft with sympathy.

Meckiff said gently: 'Sit down, Ellis. There's a good chap.'

'Yes.'

'Have another smoke.'

Ellis took the cigarette, dropped it into his lap, retrieved it and set it in the corner of his mouth. He watched them, these men who were involved so inextricably with his time of crisis. He said to Pitt: 'You know this is true.'

'Yes,' Pitt said. He looked at Vanrennan; at the clean shantung suit and the Rotary badge in its buttonhole, the regimental tie and the light, almost effeminate shoes. The hands were carefully kept; hands made for documents and things of fragility, he thought. Vanrennan smiled at him and the face, despite its cropped hair and creased flesh, was one of subtlety. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know it is true.'

Ram Channa said sullenly: 'I have appointment. If it is possible——?'

'No,' Meckiff said. 'You must wait.'

'But we have reached agreement. Am I not free?'

'Yes. You are free.'

'I would prefer to leave.'

'You may leave when this inquiry is concluded.'

'And the Coroner's Inquest?'

'You need not concern yourself.'

'In that case——'

'We have to deal with your arrest, Mr Channa.'

The Indian nodded. 'My arrest . . .'

'The *manner* of your arrest.'

'Ah . . .' The hand touched the gauze.

'We must have this information.'

'To record?'

Meckiff hesitated. 'Yes. I will record it.'

'We have made a bargain.'

'Yes.'

'I would prefer——'

'The details of your arrest are already recorded in Mr Sloan's report. We can't expunge *that* from Game Department records.'

'Details,' Freeland said, with contempt. 'You cannot call them details. I will read you the relevant extract. Listen.' The fingers riffled paper. "'The party consisted of about seventy Suru and Wakili tribesmen. It was led by an Indian who admitted on arrest to be Ram Channa, a merchant of Khedive Street, Port of Kuru. It was motorised with a closed lorry and a truck. The party dispersed into bush shortly after our appearance but seven thereof were arrested. Ram Channa was secured and the arrests were escorted across country in the lorry to Okui . . .'" Freeland tapped the report and the ruby drew the eyes to its moving point of reflected light. 'Secured—that is the interesting word. Ram Channa was secured. Is that a good word, Sloan?'

'Good enough.'

'Do you always secure prisoners by putting wire through the lobes of their ears?'

'Barbarity,' Ram Channa said softly. 'The British talk of the barbarity of black Africa. They are afraid of the barbarity. Mutilation is the mark of the savage. And all that . . .'

'Sloan?' Freeland asked.

'There is nothing to say.'

'The word "secured" is adequate?'

'Yes.'

'Sufficient for the record?'

'Yes. It is a report—not a one-act drama.'

Freeland smiled. 'That is merely impertinence.'

Meckiff said: 'Have you an explanation, Sloan?'

'No.'

'Nothing to justify this—act?'

'For me there is justification.'

'But not for us?'

'I doubt it.'

'You could try us.'

'No.'

'Try.'

'There is nothing to say. How could you know? You were not there.'

You were not there, he could have said; you were not placed at the heart of a pain you could not relieve, encompassed by it so that there was no world beyond this pain, no world beyond this sighing night of the river and the moon and the suffering herd. You were not there to hear them or to walk among them and across their shadows, those shadows which, distorted, fixed their grotesqueness upon the mind and, in so doing, the enormity of the crippling; or know this inhumanity which was apart from you, which did not reach you or afflict you or diminish you. He had gone among them and he had touched them, felt the useless leap of sinew and the shudder of revulsion in the cold grey flanks, lifted the weight of tails from the sand, held this tufted weight then dropped it inertly back into pools of shadow. He had walked among them in a misery of impotence and he had taken a stone to one of them and he had hit hit hit it across the wide frontal bone but it would not die, would not give up its lamed imperfect life and he had hit it again and again and the jar of the blows moved in pulses through his arm and it would not die and he flung the stone from him and sat by the river until his cheeks and temples cooled in river-wind, until the river became pallid with the first light of day.

He returned to the bivouac, kicked the embers of the fire, revived it with kindling. Pitt and Maclaren were asleep and he went back to the river, avoiding the herd, stripped and stood in the shallows. The river was faster and he saw that it had risen during the night. He washed. Then he left the shallows and dabbed the water from his flesh with his handkerchief, twisted his wet beard into a spike and sat on the bank in the warmth of the early sun. He watched colour come to the boles of the juniper, colour swell and hang like globules in the thickets of wild gladiolus. The sky was swollen with cumulus and the hills sharp and the ridge of the Onde mountains sharper than he had ever seen it. There was no peace or beauty in the newness of the day and he saw the river and the forest and the Onde range incompletely behind his anger.

He walked to the bivouac, this time passing through the herd. They were grouped and listless. He saw two live beasts whose hind-quarters had been eaten by scavengers. He awakened Pitt and

Maclaren and, later, they skewered biltong on their knives and fried it over the fire and watched the imprisoned fat drip and turn the flames yellow and the meat curl and blacken. They ate with distaste, tasting the smoke and the sourness of the green-edged meat, and when they had eaten he doused the fire so that its smoke should not be visible. They did not speak and he looked at them and they were like strangers; Pitt with his ripe boy's-flesh dewy from the night and the chin and cheeks golden with down: Maclaren unkempt and the face wild with pale-red bristle and the eyes empty and inward-looking because the comedy had gone and he could derive no humour from the trip or the meat or the maimed and sighing herd.

'Somehow,' Maclaren said, 'there was no ruddy kick in it any more—what with the motors gone and Haggard's leg and the crummy muck we were eating. All I wanted was hot water, a smoke and some decent grub. When we heard the trucks coming I looked at Harry and I said: What now? What the hell do we do now? We surround them or something? And he said: "It don't matter about the scruff—just grab the leaders." We moved up into cover and two trucks came out of the mist, down from the scrub, and stopped just short of the herd. The trucks were full of blacks and there was a bit of a procession following on foot and they straggled in and the blacks got out the trucks and they all started capering around like kids on an outing. Then the two wogs who'd been driving got out.' He gestured at Ram Channa. 'One of 'em was this bloke. They stood there talking and smoking cheroots in the sun and some more blacks straggled in from the bush and Channa sends two of them down to the river with billy-cans and when they come back they begin to top up the radiators. Then Channa drops the tail-boards and they go inside the trucks with several of the blacks. There is a lot of talk and excitement and Channa comes out, then goes back in again. Eventually they bring a number of large tusks out and the other wog—a big bloke in a mauve turban and with a face like a Chink—begins to saw them into short lengths. Then suddenly some of the blacks start shouting and it seems they've found the remains of our fire and Channa goes over and kicks it and bends down to feel its heat and when he straightens up he stares at the bush, turning slowly and staring very hard at every tree, rock and thicket. At that moment Sloan breaks cover and walks down to them and we follow and because we are walking slowly they do nothing, only stand there watching, and it all becomes very quiet and one of the blacks

drops the billy and we hear it roll and clatter down the bank. Then Sloan stops and we are standing a little behind him and Ram Channa stares, still holding the cheroot in his hand and the other Indian takes his foot off the tusk he is sawing and we can see the smallpox marks on his yellow face——'

'A moment,' Meckiff said. He touched Heenan's arm and Heenan indicated the pad. 'That's right,' Meckiff said. 'You get it all down.' Then, to Maclaren: 'Go on.'

'Of course, they're carrying a regular arsenal—guns, spears and machets. And some of the Wakili have bows, so small they are like toys, and arrows with little paper pellets of poison taped on the shafts ready for use. Channa is still staring as if there is something he cannot quite understand and then we see him grin as if he has realised suddenly that there are only three of us and that we have no weapons. He says something to this wog with the yellow face who immediately orders the Suru to load the sawn ivory and the tusks back into the truck. He is smoking the cheroot as calm as you like and puffing the smoke into Sloan's face.'

He listened to the voice and its note of uncertainty. The pompadour of red hair had fallen across the brow but Maclaren made no attempt to throw it off with the characteristic jerk of the head. He spoke introspectively, seated now, the body bent forward and the hands clasped between the knees. It had been a game, Sloan knew; Wardens and Wogs: Police and Poachers: a nice trip with some nice chaps and a can of beer and a yarn round the fire and maybe a rough-house at the end of it. A real nice trip and something to talk about in the European Club, the game played violently like a child's breathless battle with nothing to touch or scar the mind. Death, real death, had no part.

But the game had become ugly. It had become ugly when the leg was crushed, uglier as the days passed and Haggard's pain and fear began to divide them. He had felt this ugliness grow within himself. It was a product of the killing, of the injury, of the miscalculations, of the awareness of another man's disintegration, of the intrusion of Yule and Seaward and their sick enthusiasm for an enormous act of despoilment. The ugliness lay there, demanding to be purged: it seemed to thrust him down the slope to Ram Channa and he had felt it swell, begin to tear at this gossamer film of self-control to which he had held so desperately. He had stared at the tusks in the sand, these great curved wrenched-out teeth with their bloody roots and the sand stuck to the blood and the rags of tissue and then at

Channa's hating Asian face and its flaunting gold tooth and he had caught the strange Indian smell of the man and it had gone to the seat of the ugliness and when the smoke came insolently into his face he had reached out and taken the cheroot from the plump mauve lips and crushed it on the face and Channa's cry had released something in the silent group and movement ran through them like a ripple in water and he saw the pock-marked Indian run to the further truck and Channa himself leap to the rear of the lorry and over the tailboard. He heard Maclaren shout and the noise of an engine and then he was inside the lorry, enclosed in the putrefying scents of hides and uncleaned ivory and he saw Channa's face shift through gloom and striated light and the green turban awry on the head then low to the floor then coming upward and the tusk in Channa's hands and its arc of pitted yellow light swinging for his chest, feeling his own sideways lurch and the piled wire snares collapsed about him and the splintered root of the tusk impaling his shoulder and the jar when his boot sank into the Indian's genitals and the snares springing sharp against his hip and the odour of Channa's breath and his own enspittled voice saying: 'That's for the tusks. That's for the herd. That's for the valley . . .' and Channa's body diminishing under the blows and the face grey-yellow and the hands clawing and his own fingers on the snare, on the sharp freed end of the snare, and the moment when he thrust it through the brown ear and the Indian's scream and the wetness of blood on his fingers and, then, the quietness, the sudden quietness in which he stared from the floor across the curve of Channa's cheek to the brilliant bulb of white sunlight beyond the lorry and the anger draining from him like something tapped and lost immediately. He got up and he lifted Channa and he could not control the shaking of his limbs and he sat Channa in the well of the lorry and he threaded the snare behind one of the curved wood battens of the lorry and twisted the two wires until they were joined. 'There,' he said. 'You're lucky I don't put it round your throat. Now. You ready to talk?'

'Yes.'

'Name?'

'Ram Channa.'

'From where?'

'Port of Kuru.'

'Where in Port of Kuru?'

'I am going to be sick.'

Sloan hit him and the mouth spewed. 'Address?'

'Khedive Street.'

'You have papers to prove this?'

'Yes. Papers.'

'Who will receive the ivory?'

Channa shook his head, cried with pain because the ear was attached.

'Who will receive the ivory?'

'I cannot say,' Channa whispered.

Sloan lifted the tusk, held the point against Channa's stomach.

'You tell me or, so help me, I'll run this tooth through you.'

'Hassan. Paul Hassan.'

'Address?'

'Government Road. Port of Kuru.'

'Is he the big boy?'

'Yes.'

'The real big boy?'

'Yes.'

He dropped the tusk into the scattered snares, climbed from the lorry into sunlight. His hands were sticky with Channa's blood and he looked at them and the blood rimmed the finger-nails, lay where the fingers joined. The other truck had gone and Pitt and Maclaren stood silently by a group of tribesmen. One of them wore a string vest and gym shoes. He counted them. They were seven. 'Is this all?' he asked tiredly. Maclaren nodded. 'They beat it fast into the bush.'

'I see.' He looked at his hands again and he went to the river and put them in the water and watched the water darken. Then he took sand from the bed and rubbed it into the flesh and the nails and immersed his hands in the running river until their soiling had been washed from them. The river was rising but, with luck, the rains would not break before they reached Okui.

He heard Maclaren's hesitant voice, slow and trailing into silence . . . 'and that's how it was.'

'You did not see what happened in the lorry?'

'No.'

'And you, Pitt?'

'No.'

'What happened to the other—er—Indian?'

'Wog,' Ram Channa said spitefully. 'That was the expression.'

'What happened to him?'

Pitt said deliberately: 'That particular wog escaped in the truck.'

'And then?'

'The seven tribesmen were taken to the lorry.'

'And secured?'

'Yes.'

'By their ears?'

Pitt smiled. 'We wired their wrists.'

'You saw Channa?'

'Yes.'

'Were you shocked?'

'No.'

'You surprise me.'

'Why? It was no more than——'

'No more than what?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Freeland said sardonically: 'He was about to say that it was no more than poetic justice.'

'Oh? Then why didn't he say it?'

'Perhaps he does not like clichés,' Vanrennan said.

'You hear that?' Ellis said. 'I told you he was educated.'

'Is that what you were about to say, Pitt?' Meckiff asked.

'Yes.'

'The poacher ensnared by his own wire?'

'That's it.'

'You really believe it was proper?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Was it right or wrong?'

Pitt hesitated. 'It was right—at the time.'

Meckiff nodded. 'But not in retrospect. I understand. But your views are unimportant. What happened then?'

'We examined the lorry. It contained fuel, rifles, ammo—and food.'

'What did you do?'

'We went down to the herd and we slaughtered them. Then we ate.'

'And after that?'

'We crossed the marsh to Okui.'

Heenan turned paper.

'Are you getting all this?'

'Yes.'

'Now, Sloan,' Meckiff said. 'We come to the incident in the lorry. Maclaren states that Ram Channa ran to the rear and climbed over the tail-board. Is that right?'

'Yes.'

'And that you followed?'
 'Yes.'
 'What was Channa's object?'
 'To get to the driving-seat.'
 'To make off?'
 'Yes.'
 'Did he reach the driving-seat?'
 'No.'
 'You reached him first?'
 'Yes.'
 'Now tell me this. Did Channa offer any resistance?'
 'He did indeed.'
 'What kind of resistance?'
 'He picked up a tusk and swung it at me.'
 'A tusk,' Channa said, with scorn. 'I could not lift a tusk and swing it.'
 'You deny it?'
 'Yes.'
 'Mr Sloan is a liar?'
 'Yes.'
 'Did you offer resistance?'
 'None.'
 'And you claim you are not strong enough to lift a tusk and wield it as a weapon?'
 'Yes.'
 'But you admit there were tusks inside the lorry?'
 'Yes.'
 'But they were too heavy for you?'
 'Yes. Too heavy.'
 'That is untrue,' Sloan said. 'The tusk used was about forty pounds' weight.'
 Ram Channa shook his head. 'No, no.'
 Sloan said evenly: 'I am well aware of the weights of the ivory delivered at Okui. Major Freeland has a certified schedule. There were eighteen pairs including one pair which had been partially sawn. The smallest pair weighed thirty-five and forty-one pounds. Most of them were pairs of between fifty and sixty pounds each. And the largest pair tipped ninety-one and one hundred and three pounds. Am I right?'
 'Yes,' Freeland said. 'It is all here.'
 'Mr Channa,' Meckiff said. 'Did you use a tusk as a weapon?'
 'No.'

'You still contend Mr Sloan is lying?'

'Yes.'

Sloan said: 'The root end of the tusk was swung at me. It struck me in the shoulder.'

'Can you prove this?'

Sloan stood, removed his shirt. A dressing covered the area above the left pectoral. The chest was deep and matted with light-brown hair, heavily ridged with muscle. He looked very large.

'As if I would fight a man of this size,' Channa protested.

Sloan took the edge of the plaster, ripped down the dressing to expose the area. It was dark with bruising and they could see the lips of small cuts and a jagged wound sprouting a line of stitches. He said: 'It was treated by a Dr Cartwright of Okui. He will confirm that pieces of splintered bone were removed from the wound.' He sat, replaced the dressing, draped the shirt around his shoulders and knotted its sleeves at the throat.

'I see,' Channa said sullenly.

Meckiff left the window, stared at Heenan's pad, returned to the window. He seemed disconcerted. He said to Sloan: 'What happened then?'

'I—secured him.'

'Let us talk in plain English,' Meckiff said irritably. 'You stuck the wire of a snare through his ear?'

'Yes.'

'Deliberately?'

'I knew I had done it.'

'I don't mean that. I mean was it done in the heat of the moment?'

'Yes,' Sloan said. 'The wire was under my hand—and I used it.'

Channa rose, beat the table with his fist. 'The heat of the moment. . . . The sibilant voice trembled, soared. 'Am I an animal to be tethered like a bull with a ring through the nose? Is that what I am?' The fist beat again. 'The heat of the moment . . . Is it the heat of the moment when he punch me until I am sick? Is it the heat of the moment when he holds the tusk at my stomach and threaten to nail me to the floor unless I give him the name of another? When he ties me by my poor bleeding ear to the side of the lorry . . . ? An animal—is that what I am?' The memory of the lorry came into his face and the stained eyes widened. He held both hands to the pit of his stomach. The rage evaporated. He whispered: 'He would have done it. I saw his face. He would have done it. That tusk . . . ' He sat and stared at Sloan. 'He is a madman.'

'Is this true, Sloan?' Meckiff asked.

'Yes.'

'You threatened to impale Channa with a tusk?'

'Yes.'

Meckiff nodded, leaned slightly from the casement so that he felt the moving air against his cheeks. Men in capes were working at the lake in the compound. One of them looked up and the face, purple in rain like a dark wet grape, grinned at him. He said, without turning: 'Tell me something, Sloan. Would you really have done this thing?' He waited but there was no reply and he felt the silence of the room heavy behind him. 'Sloan?' he said. He turned and he was aware again of Sloan's beauty; this face which, in its gravity and its tawny hair and beard, was strangely biblical; the ardent body like that of an animal which quivers for release and whose stillness will translate into rhythms of agility. That's what he is, he thought; a kind of articulate animal: half wild. He stared at Sloan, wary of this amalgam of gentleness and ferocity.

'I do not know,' Sloan said. 'I do not know.'

5

MECKIFF SAID TO ELLIS: 'So we are left with you and Vanrennan—and Haggard. In your charge.' He emphasised the word and he saw the guilt in the eyes.

'Yes,' Ellis said. 'In our charge.'

'At the head of the gorge.'

'Yes. At the head of the gorge.' He saw it again: blue and smoking with heat, capped in liveries of vegetation. He had been afraid of it. It lay between the valley and the plain like an immense rock trap. It would open to receive them. It was a place of endings and destinies, of iron silences beneath the voice of the river. He had been afraid of it and Vanrennan, too, had sensed its menace and they stood unmoving with Haggard's weight between them and the smell of caves already acrid on the air. They were reluctant to move and Vanrennan said: 'Don't much fancy the night there.' The sun was in its downward arc, radiating the aureoles of evening and leaving the gorge to shadow. 'No,' he said. 'Not the night there.' He looked backward and the valley seemed gentler; steeped in the pinkness of its own stored light. The river, funnelled now by the rising entrances to the gorge, was rapid. He watched the passage of brush and

grasses: a severed liana came sinuous on the current like a water-serpent. He said: 'We can't stop. We can't lose time.' They moved into the shadow of outcrops. Now, he thought, staring into Meckiff's eyes, we are approaching it again, having to relive it. He looked at Vanrennan and he saw the Afrikaner's almost imperceptible nod. He said to Meckiff: 'We passed into the gorge. There is a point where it lifts and leans inward in two great overhangs and there is no direct sunlight, only the reflection of the river.' He saw again those dancing spheres of light, lemon on the rock-walls, pale-green on moss, seeming to enter and die in crevices. 'The light was failing and we made camp as high as we could get above the river. There was ample brushwood and we started a fire. Earlier I had shot a tommie and we cooked and ate some of the meat we'd retained. Haggard lay still and his voice was so faint that we could hardly hear it above the sound of the river. He would not eat. A few sips of water—that was all. I offered to wash the leg but he would not have it touched. I lifted the blanket but the light had dimmed, everything in the canyon grey and blurred and the flicker of firelight reaching in tongues up the walls. "I'm glad the pain has gone," he said: but the flesh of the foot was like sodden paper—you could put your finger in it and leave a deep impression—and the leg gave off a dreadful putrid smell.' Ellis puckered his nose as if this odour of deadness remained in the nostrils. It had gone deeper than the organ of smell, he knew: deep into his own living tissue which had understood and recoiled. He said: 'The moonlight did not filter very far and we could not see the river. But we could hear the cataracts and the river immediately below us. It was a constant murmur which seemed to lull me into a half-sleep. I don't think I slept but I lay there on that ledge of rock in the warmth of the fire, listening to the river and the wind and almost sleeping and then coming awake because I could not lose my fear of the gorge and the river. I remember jerking abruptly from this half-sleep and sitting upright. Something had changed—or approached—and I looked around me but there was no movement and Haggard and Vanrennan slept and the fire was still flickering on the rock. And then I heard it. It was the river. The note had changed. It was an urgent, boiling noise; much nearer, much more than a murmur. I listened but even in that moment of recognising the change it seemed to retreat and there was only the old, rather sullen murmur and I sat there wondering whether I had dreamed it. I got up and went to where the ledge fell away and looked over, straining my eyes in the darkness. I could see the river caught with faint light from the moon and it seemed much the

same but, then, as I was about to turn away I saw that the rock immediately below the ledge was dripping with water!' Ellis shook his head as the fear re-entered him. 'I stared at the rock. It was like a cliff by the sea where a great wave has reached suddenly and casually. The rock was streaming, still spouting little runnels of water. I woke Vanrennan and we both went to the edge.' He looked from Meckiff to Vanrennan. 'You remember that? The rock streaming . . .'

'It was a flash-flood,' Vanrennan said. 'It rose a good thirty feet, then fell again——'

'And it put the wind up us, I can tell you,' Ellis said. 'The sky was lighter and we could see a grey bloom in the east. We did not waste time. We settled Haggard in the stretcher and made our way from the ledge to the floor of the gorge. We had not even kicked out the fire and I looked back once and you could still see the reflection of flame on the high walls of rock. We marched. Everywhere, every cave and crevice, was running with water from the passage of the flood.' He was speaking rapidly; as if something of that urgency of movement remained to accelerate his voice. 'We passed from under the overhangs to where the gorge widens. There was more light and the river was lower, perhaps not even as fast. But we had learned to distrust it. We kept going until——'

'Until his legs went,' Vanrennan said. 'Until his poor blubbery legs went and he sat down on his bottom and cried like a baby.'

Ellis nodded. 'I don't deny it.' He looked at Meckiff for understanding. Meckiff and his reservoir of strength was now the natural repository for weakness. He said softly, confessing it: 'I was exhausted. I'd had diarrhoea continuously. I'd walked through all that sun without proper food. And the river frightened me. It had frightened me so badly that the last shred of strength seemed to leave me and I sat there without power of movement, without even caring.'

'And Haggard?'

'He had not spoken,' Vanrennan said. 'He lay like a man in a coma. He smelled—corrupt. I pulled the blanket from him and examined the leg. It was gangrenous, not only the lower leg but almost to the groin. He was plainly dying.'

'Yes,' Ellis said. 'Dying.' He touched Meckiff's arm. 'He was dying.'

'Could you do nothing for him?'

'Ah,' Ellis said, the eyes vindictive. 'This was where the great Dutch trekker made the great decision. "That leg," he said, "will have to come off." "Come off?" I said. "You don't mean——?"' "Yes," he said . . .' the voice roughened in deliberate mimicry . . .

“There in’t nothin’ else fer it. That leg got to come off.” Ellis stared accusingly. ‘He was itching to get his hands on his knife and take that poor devil’s leg off. You know—the way they do it in films and novels. But I got to my feet as best I could and I said: “You leave him be. If he’s dying then leave him in peace.” At that moment a high swell of water with a lot of grass and bracken in it surged down the river and broke almost to our feet and I said: “Come on. Come on. We have to hurry.” And we lifted the stretcher and began to walk. We heard the cataracts roar when the swell reached them and the noise subsiding and the murmur of the river again. God knows where my strength came from but we walked, and we walked fast, and soon we saw where the cataracts left the water in big black reefs of rock. We could see the sun above the gorge and the mist coming off the river like white choking smoke.’

Meckiff listened. The voice had slowed. Haggard’s death lay near and Ellis paused before the fact of it. He had been led to this point of finality and he was alone; alone with the narrative, isolated by Vanrennan’s long silences. This was the point, Meckiff knew, where he would choose between truth and duplicity. The last four words were hesitant; as if nothing lay beyond them but a region of terror. Like . . . white . . . choking . . . smoke. The room was silent. He saw the eyes look to Vanrennan, like a plea for support. He said quietly: ‘Do we come, now, to his death?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘There isn’t much to tell. Vanrennan was leading and the ground rose steeply toward the cataracts. Because of this steepness the blankets unwound suddenly and hung from the stretcher. We stopped and I tied the blankets and, as I straightened, I saw Haggard’s face. The eyes and mouth were open and the head had rolled to one side. “Haggard,” I said, “Haggard.” But there was no reply; and when we went to him we found that he had—gone.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘We buried him.’

‘Where?’

‘There—by the river.’

‘Above the bank?’

‘Yes.’

‘Below the cataracts?’

‘Yes.’

'How far below?'
 'About two hundred yards.'
 'You actually dug a grave?'
 'Oh, yes.'
 'What kind of soil was it?'
 'Loose, sandy soil.'
 'Loose enough to dig?'
 'Yes.'
 'And what did you use?'
 'Use?'
 'To dig the grave. You had no spades, had you?'
 'No.'
 'Then what did you use?'
 Ellis glanced at Vanrennan.
 Vanrennan said: 'There were plenty of sharp flints.'
 'Flintstones?'
 'Yes.'
 'How deep was the grave?'
 'About five feet,' Ellis said.
 'As deep as that?'
 'Yes.'
 'He is safe from scavengers?'
 'Yes. We covered the grave in heavy stones and we built a small stone cairn at the head.'
 'Did you—say anything?'
 'At the burial?'
 'Yes.'
 Ellis fidgeted, stared at his hands. 'We couldn't remember much. Not the proper Order for Burial or anything like that.'
 'Then what did you say?'
 'Just—bits.'
 'Bits?'
 'A few bits we remembered.'
 'Such as?'
 'You want me to——?'
 'Yes. Let us hear these—bits.'
 Ellis was silent. Then, slowly: 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord ...' He paused.
 'Please don't make me say all this.'
 'Finish it.'
 'They weren't the proper words.'
 'It doesn't matter. Just tell us what you said.'

'Then I said: He cometh up and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow . . .

'Go on, Ellis.'

The mouth trembled. 'In the midst of life we are in death. O, blessed be the name of the Lord . . . We commit his body to the ground . . .' Ellis touched his brow distractedly. 'Why are you making me do this?'

'Finish it.'

'But that's all.'

'No more bits?'

'No.'

'Not the bit about ashes to ashes?'

'No.'

'I should've thought you'd remember that bit.'

'We said the Lord's Prayer.'

'Ah . . .'

'We said it together.'

'Over Haggard's grave?'

Ellis nodded.

'Poor Haggard,' Meckiff said. 'Buried in that lonely gorge without a proper service.' He stroked his medal-ribbons. 'But there is something that puzzles me. An omission.'

'What kind of omission?' Vanrennan asked.

'You omitted to remove his papers.'

'His papers?'

'His personal papers. His Document of Identity. His money, his wallet. And all the odds and ends that people carry and which are removed from them when they are buried in such circumstances. None of these was delivered at Mirembe when you reported his death.'

Ellis repeated it: 'They were not delivered . . .'

'No. Why?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know? But you know if you removed them.'

'We didn't remove them.'

'You forgot?'

'Yes.'

'But you remembered to recite a few bits of the Burial Order. And the Lord's Prayer.'

'I told you we forgot. The river was rising. We did not think clearly.'

'You're not thinking clearly now, are you?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean.'

'No, I don't.'

'Ellis.'

'Yes?'

'The grave is marked, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Just as you said? With a cairn of stones two hundred yards below the falls?'

'Yes.'

'Well above the river?'

'Yes.'

'We could find it?'

'I daresay.'

'I might have to consider that.'

'You'd—recover him?'

'Yes. I might have to remove him to Port of Kuru for decent burial.'

'You forget the river,' Vanrennan said. 'Maybe it'll cover that grave.'

Meckiff shook his head. 'I think I could reach it. The rains are on but the river's not yet in spate. And he said it was well above the river.'

'Well,' Ellis said, with unease. 'Perhaps not as high as all that.'

Meckiff left the window, looked into the defensive eyes. He said softly: 'You'd like me to recover Haggard's body, wouldn't you?'

'I don't care.'

'But you must care. You'd have to show us the exact position.'

'I would?'

'Of course.' Meckiff smiled. 'Let's recapitulate.' He bent to the table, turned paper. 'According to your report the pair of you buried Haggard and continued through Staedtler's Gorge, reaching the plain later that day. There, you were fortunate enough to meet a safari party; Mr Quinn and his client—a Mr Ira Kreb. This particular party, it transpired, had been in the vicinity of the central plain when it met with Athumani and Jeru. The scouts informed Quinn that some kind of accident had happened in the gorge and Quinn, very properly to my mind, decided to investigate. The two trucks made for the gorge and picked you up in the lower flood-plain. Quinn says you were in extremely bad shape.'

'Yes.'

'You then told Quinn of the events leading to your predicament;

how Sloan, Pitt and Maclaren had gone on into the valley without weapons or equipment; and how Inspector Haggard had died in your care and was buried in the gorge. Right?

'Yes.'

'Now this is what happened. Because of your condition Quinn sent you and Vanrennan, together with Mrs Kreb, back to Mirembe in one of the trucks. And he and Kreb, the two scouts and two of his own men took the remaining truck down to the mouth of the gorge. Because there was a possibility that Sloan's team might have been forced to return that way they then went on foot into the gorge. All right so far?'

'Yes.'

'Quinn went about one-quarter of the length of the gorge. There were several minor flash-floods and he decided that he could not expose the party to further risk. Then they turned about and made their way back to the truck—and from there to Mirembe. Got it?'

'Yes.'

Meckiff moved behind Ellis, dropped his hand on the shoulder and stared down at the damp crown of the head. He held the hand there. He said: 'You'll take me to the grave, won't you?'

'No.'

'But you must.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I couldn't. Not that awful gorge again.'

'But it's your duty.'

The head shook in refusal.

'Ellis . . .'

'No.'

He felt the shoulder quiver under his fingers. 'Why are you lying?'

'I am not lying.'

'I think so.'

The head shook again.

'You are lying.'

'No.'

'Is there really a grave?'

'Yes.'

'With a cairn of stones?'

'Yes.'

'You buried him with all his papers and possessions?'

'I told you.'

'You buried him reverently with a little of the Burial Order and the Lord's Prayer?'

'Yes.'

'You are lying.'

'I am telling the truth.'

'You are lying and I have proof you are lying. There was no grave.' He withdrew his hand and the back leaned forward, the shoulders bowed. He had withdrawn his hand, withdrawn his sympathy, and Ellis was utterly alone, without contact and in some way more defenceless. He said quietly: 'I ought not to toy with you. It is not too late to tell the truth. That is all I want. The truth.'

Ellis was silent.

'Won't you turn to look at me?'

'No.'

Vanrennan said: 'If you have something to say, Superintendent, I think you should say it.'

Meckiff nodded. 'Perhaps you are right.' He went to the door, opened it and called down the passage: 'Will you bring Mr Quinn and Mr Kreb in here?'

A voice answered and they heard another door, the movement of feet and the scrape of chairs. Quinn and Kreb came into the room. They brought the raw smell of rain with them. The oilskins glistened and water beaded the hems. Kreb's nose was red from sunburn, the face comical in its clown-like cast: streaks of pomaded hair fell from the bald head across the temples. He looked at Sloan and he said softly: 'Hello, Sloan.' He seemed embarrassed. 'I was sorry to hear about this.' Quinn stared at them without expression. He was wide, almost square in the oilskin, rustling. They could see the horizontal cracks in the oilskin where it had lain folded.

Meckiff said: 'It was good of you to come.'

'You're welcome.'

'Mr Quinn.'

'Yes?'

'You know about this inquiry? The circumstances?'

'We do.'

'Ellis here . . .' he indicated the bowed back . . . 'has been telling us about Inspector Haggard's death.'

'That poor man,' Kreb said sadly.

'Yes,' Meckiff said. 'We are all very sad about it.' He searched the brief-case that had leaned against the leg of the table, produced a slender wallet, its leather stained as if from immersion; some papers crinkled and stuck together; a comb; three keys on a ring and a small

cloth bag drawn at the neck which rang with the sound of coins; a fountain-pen and a card in a cellophane cover. He placed them on the table before Ellis.

'What are these?' Ellis said.

'Tom Haggard's things. The personal effects found on his body.'

'Like a rabbit out of a hat,' Vanrennan said.

Meckiff said to Quinn: 'Will you tell us how you came by them?'

Quinn nodded. 'We took them from a body in a pool at the mouth of the gorge.'

'A policeman's body,' Kreb said.

'You hear that, Ellis?' Meckiff said. 'Haggard's body in a pool. Not in a grave above the river at a point below the cataracts; but in a pool at the mouth of the gorge.' He watched Ellis's hand toy with the objects on the table. 'The body was found by one of Mr Quinn's trackers when they were returning from the gorge to the plain. They recovered it and searched it. Then——' He looked at Quinn.

'It was in no condition to be transported,' Quinn said. 'So we buried it.'

'With a cairn of stones?'

Quinn looked surprised. 'Why, yes. We covered the grave with stones.'

'And then a few reverent words?'

'I don't understand.'

'No, of course you don't. I'm sorry. It's a private joke between myself and Ellis.' He touched Ellis's shoulder, saying, with sarcasm: 'Are there two graves in the gorge?'

Sloan said: 'I don't care for your sense of humour, Meckiff.' He stood, took his chair to Ellis's elbow, sat there and stared into the face. 'We only want the truth, Ellis.' The face was sullen. Beside it was another face; blurred by the depth of water, still fastidious and the hair lifting and wavering like the filaments of an aquatic plant.

Kreb said: 'We were very worried, Mr Sloan. It conflicted so disturbingly with what Mr Ellis and Mr Vanrennan had told us. So . . .' the voice was apologetic . . . 'so I'm afraid we had to inform the police in Mirembe.'

Meckiff said, in sudden temper: 'All that disgusting nonsense about the Burial Order and the Lord's Prayer——'

'Ellis,' Sloan said. 'Are you going to tell us the truth?'

'Ask Vanrennan.'

'What about it, Vanrennan?'

Vanrennan said nothing, began to twist the Rotary badge in the lapel.

'For Christ's sake,' Maclaren said. 'If only we could finish this and get out of here.'

Ellis said: 'I'll try to tell you what happened. I'll try—but it isn't easy.' He lifted Haggard's comb, ran his thumbnail repeatedly against the teeth. They listened to this ripple of teeth and Sloan took the comb from him and placed it beyond reach. A few pale hairs still clung to the tortoiseshell and he touched them and it was the same hair that had brushed his face when he had carried Haggard from the river. He could see the minute white sacs that had lain in Haggard's scalp. He pulled the hair from the teeth and closed his hand on it and he heard Ellis say nervously: 'I admit it wasn't that way—not the dying on the stretcher and the grave and the prayers. I admit it. But somehow it seemed better to put it like that, to leave him decently and quietly buried instead of lost in the waters of the river. It seemed better, you understand?' He looked swiftly at Meckiff. 'We walked to where the cataracts rosc. The rock builds itself in stairs from one side of the river to the other and, at points, the river actually runs through long rock tunnels. It is necessary to climb from the river bank, up the rocks and out across the river so that you are walking on a narrow ridge above the rapids, on a ridge which curves and leads you down to where the bank continues. It was high and wet with spray and below us the river dropped in long green falls. We were very weak, both of us, and we went slowly, a step at a time then pausing then another step, out across the falls and all the while the spray and the noise coming up to us and a wide dark whirlpool sucking at the foot of the falls. I could feel my legs trembling and my fingers barely holding the handles of the stretcher. Haggard had opened his eyes and I saw him lift his head and stare down the cataracts and the lips move, but I could not hear him above the noise of the water. It was difficult to find a foothold and I could feel grass seeds sharp inside my boots and there were wires of bindweed crossing the rock and hanging in festoons above the rapids. We stopped at the highest point and put down the stretcher on the ridge and I wiped the sweat from my hands and Vanrennan nodded and we lifted the stretcher. Then it happened.' He paused as if to consider his words. 'My foot caught in the bindweed and I fell forward and the stretcher twisted in my hands and Vanrennan slipped and in that second Haggard tipped sidewise out of the stretcher and over the ridge and down the falls . . .' The furtive eyes went from Meckiff to Vanrennan and Sloan followed them and saw

a brief perplexity in the Afrikaner's face. 'We stood there and the stretcher was light in our hands and we stared down the falls and along the river but there was no sign of Haggard. No sign.' He moistened his mouth. 'That's what happened, Superintendent.' He looked at Meckiff for reaction. 'Just like that.'

'And then what?'

'We went down from the ridge to the bank and away from all this rushing water, down to where it was quiet. We sat on the bank but we did not speak. We sat and looked at the river.'

Meckiff said: 'Now we must get this absolutely straight, Ellis. Haggard tipped from the stretcher and, you say, you felt it become light in your hands. You then made your way down from the cataracts.'

'That's it.'

'Taking the empty stretcher with you?'

'Yes.'

'Had you lost the rifle and the blankets?'

Ellis hesitated 'Yes. They went with Haggard.'

'And you carried the stretcher down the ridge and along the bank and sat down?'

'Yes.'

'Then what did you do?'

'Do? I suppose we rested and moved off.'

'Yes, I know. But I must have details, don't you see? All the details for Mr Hecnan. The stretcher, for example.' The voice was casual. 'Did you leave it on the bank?'

Ellis frowned, lifted Haggard's keys and spun them idly on the ring. He said carefully: 'It had been built out of two bamboo poles and a doubled blanket. We took it to pieces and recovered the blanket.'

'And off you went?'

'Yes.'

'Leaving the poles on the bank?'

'Yes.'

'But you had no blanket when Quinn found you.'

Ellis hesitated again. 'No. Later, we discarded it. It had supported Haggard and it had become—unpleasant.'

Quinn said in his thick voice: 'Well, if this don't beat cock-fighting.' He looked at Krebs. 'Did you ever hear such a pack of lies?'

Krebs shook his head gravely. The cheeks had flushed with embarrassment.

'Lies?' Sloan asked.

'Lies.'

'I don't understand,' Ellis said. 'What is this about stretchers and blankets? I don't understand.'

'Tell him,' Meckiff said to Quinn.

'When we found the body,' Quinn said slowly, 'it lay at the bottom of the pool. It lay face upwards on a stretcher. It had been retained in the stretcher by two lianas—one around the thighs and the other around the chest. This is what we could not understand.' He stared at Ellis. 'One of the things we could not understand.'

Meckiff said: 'Do you confirm this, Mr Krebs?'

'Surely. It was as Quinn says.'

Vanrennan said sourly: 'You've been too clever by half, booby.'

Sloan opened his hand and the strands of Haggard's hair were stuck to the palm. He felt the pressure mounting, that same pressure which had grown and torn him when Channa had expelled the smoke in his face. He could see Haggard's face, pallid and luminously green in the pool and the movement of the river in the waving hair and, then, the face rocking swiftly within the key-ring, the ring swinging now like a pendulum in Ellis's nervous hands. He gripped the elbow-joint of the arm and the keys fell to the table and he saw Ellis wince from the pain of the grip and he whispered: 'What happened to Haggard? What did you do to him?' He contracted his fingers and Ellis cried from the pain and he said: 'So you stood there and the stretcher was light in your hands, was it?' He stood, raising Ellis from the chair and he heard himself shout: 'What happened to him?' and he began to shake Ellis so violently that the body seemed loose and disjointed like that of a broken marionette and the head reeled and he felt Meckiff's arm around him, pulling, dragging, the voice urgent in his ear: 'Stop it, Sloan! You'll shake the life out of him! Control yourself, man.' He released the grip and Ellis collapsed in the chair, the head cradled on the arms and the shoulders shaking. He sat, stared at his opened hand. Haggard's hair adhered to the palm. He heard Channa shout excitedly: 'There—what did I tell you? A madman . . .' The passion had released something in the room and they were moving; Maclaren's hand raking the red hair and Freeland's fingers tapping rapidly so that the ruby winked and Pitt and Vanrennan shifting in concern through the smoke-grey olive light of the room and Krebs's shoulders bending in commiseration over Ellis's cradled head. Quinn removed his oilskin, flung it on a chair, went to the window, turned, came back.

'Sit down,' Meckiff told them. 'Everyone sit down. Sit.' He waited

and the pulse of movement stopped and the bodies, the faces and the voices were stilled. 'Is everyone quite calm now?' The roar of rain in the roof reimposed itself. He heard Sloan's heavy breathing and Ellis's sobs. 'Good,' he said. He sat, lighted a cigarette, threw the packet on to the table. Then: 'Mr Vanrennan. I think we should now hear the truth. You will have to give evidence at the Coroner's Inquest. Surely the time has come for truth, for honesty?'

Vanrennan nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'I think the time has come for truth.'

Vanrennan said: 'It was exactly as Ellis described it; the trek through the valley and into the gorge, the gradual loss of strength, the bickering, the rising river and that night when the water rose suddenly to the ledge on which we slept. And Haggard's deterioration. I want you to understand that the leg had gangrened, that there was nothing we could do, that he was dying. Whatever lie we collaborated in to conceal our defeat, our eventual cowardice, you must believe me when I say he was dying. In one sense that makes it worse; the desertion of a dying man. But that is *our* problem; myself and Ellis. It is something we have to recognise within ourselves, a failure we are unlikely to forget and which has left us smaller men. But it may help you, Superintendent. And you, too, Harry; you have your share of the burden of guilt and it may be easier to bear if you remember that, whatever happened, his death was inevitable, was probably inevitable from the moment of the accident.' The voice was even: the manner of delivery precise and free of the vernacular. They listened. Vanrennan, now, was a stranger. Ellis lifted his head and stared accusingly. He would not look at Meckiff; this hostile man who had taken his weakness and used it for betrayal. 'We approached the cataracts. The ground rose in sharp rock-formations and, once, Haggard almost fell. We rested the stretcher and tied him in with vines.' The lips smiled thinly. 'I think Weeping Willie here was so anxious to make his story good that he overlooked this. We went very carefully; up this wet rock staircase and out over the river. It was turbulent. There was a feeling of mounting power. I could see the river enter the tunnels, hear it in the tunnels, and feel the vibration of it through the rock and in my legs. I was afraid. I saw the torn reeds and leaves going swiftly over the falls and there was a second when I felt myself reel. I stopped and stood quite still, waiting for the giddiness to pass. Ellis said: "What's up?" And I said: "Put it down for a moment." We placed the stretcher so that it lay securely on the ridge. The gorge tightens into

a narrow waist at this point and the noise is magnified. We could see downstream beyond the white water to the mouth of the gorge. Behind us the view was cut by walls and overhangs with the river gathering pace for the descent over the cataracts. I bent to lift the stretcher and in that moment of bending I heard a change in the note of the river. I could not immediately interpret this change. But there is a pattern of sound, you understand? And anything that breaks this pattern is at once obtrusive. Ellis heard it too, and I turned to look at him. It seemed to come from the tunnels and when we looked they were entirely submerged and it was this that had muted the sound of the water within them. "It's rising," I said. And then, as we bent to the stretcher, we heard this noise, this terrible noise from upstream. It is impossible to describe——'

'It was like a train,' Ellis said in a catarrhal voice. 'A hollow rushing noise like a train going over a bridge——'

'Yes,' Vanrennan said. 'And it was coming fast and the gorge seemed to fill with the noise of it——'

'And now we could not even hear the falls——'

'—and I heard it coming nearer, nearer, nearer and I looked at Ellis and I heard his voice shout above the noise: "It's a flood!" And the word seemed to shake us free of this—rigor of terror that held us on the ridge and——' The voice stopped. Vanrennan pursed his lips as if he could not bring himself to utter the words of shame. Ellis leaned forward, united now with Vanrennan in this narrative which was leading them to the final diminishment. He mouthed the words across the table and Sloan heard them, fainter than a whisper. 'We ran.'

'What did you say?' he said, with sudden fear.

Ellis shook his head.

'Yes,' Vanrennan said. 'We ran. We ran down the curve of the ridge and through the spray and up the rising rock above the cataracts, clambering, falling, driven by fear and this terrible noise. We had surrendered to panic.'

'Are you telling us,' Meckiff said, with incredulity, 'that you left him?'

'Yes.'

'On that ridge above the cataracts in the path of the river?'

'Yes. We—abandoned him.' Then, with dignity: 'That is the truth of it.'

'We turned,' Ellis said thickly. 'We were clutching each other like two frightened kids. We looked down on the falls and we could see the stretcher on the ridge and Haggard's face moving from side to

side and the river swelling with a kind of oily agitation and all the while this onrushing noise. We waited. And then . . . ' He stopped, shook his head again.

'Then,' Vanrennan said, 'a high green wall of water came. It seemed slow, almost leisurely. It came and there was an impression of enormous weight moving. It approached the cataracts, lapped over them like a great sullen wave, submerged them so that for a moment there were no falls, no reefs, just the green wall of water. And it took Haggard on the crest, actually floating and buoyant on the crest, and we saw the stretcher go by like——' He hesitated.

'Like a boat,' Ellis said fearfully. 'Just like a boat. Calm and steady on the crest, with such serenity . . .' He closed his eyes. 'Oh, my God . . .' He whispered: 'I wanted to laugh.' He grinned and the face was hysterical. He began to shake with silent laughter. 'Like a boat . . .'

Meckiff arranged his papers. He said carefully: 'When I began this inquiry I told you that I was shocked and resentful. That is still true. But now, now that I have heard the facts, I am—bewildered. Consider. Consider the affair in relation to two points in time; the point of departure, the point of ending. It begins in Mirembe with all the ingredients of a successful expedition: a Warden and two scouts of the Game Department, a signals officer on loan from the Army, a police officer, three settlers acting as honorary rangers, two trucks, a radio transmitter, weapons, victuals, everything necessary to the effectiveness of a unit that was to be an arm of a planned operation. It ends in—fiasco: a policeman dead, the trucks gone, hardly an item of equipment, two men wandering exhausted on the plain; and the Warden limping into Okui a hundred miles distant with the remnant of his team. What was the prize? The justification for this sacrifice?' He lifted a sheet of paper. 'It is here, all here. An ancient lorry of doubtful value, a few thousand pounds' weight of second-grade ivory and eight captives who, in view of the peculiar circumstances, I shall have to release. That is all we have to show.' He smiled coldly. 'And if I cannot charge Ram Channa and the seven Suru I may even have to return the lorry. What do you think of that?'

They watched him.

'Now you cannot ascribe all this to the operation of chance. You cannot dismiss it with glib references to the wheel of fortune. Between these points in time lies a sequence of events which appear to flow from the fanatical resolve of one man. Nothing, not even

considerations of personal survival, was allowed to impede the pursuit of this—unseen army of poachers.

'The pattern takes shape at the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge; the limit, that is, of the sector in which the team was to operate. It is quite plain that Sloan, drawn as always to the gorge and the Suswa Valley by some inner compulsion which perhaps not even he can explain, was determined to enter. No amount of specious argument, no allowance for a reasonable degree of flexibility can excuse this calculated deviation from the plan of campaign. It was deliberate. The valley lay ahead, this valley which over the years has come to be known derisively as Sloan's private paradise. A party of poachers, estimated at four hundred, was about to defile it.' He repeated it: 'To defile it. Not, mark you, to enter it, steal and then depart. But to defile it.' He smiled cynically. 'There is a subtle distinction—and it has to be borne in mind in considering the man in relation to the events to follow.

'Haggard protested: rightly so. He was the representative, so to speak, of the Police Department—which was committed to the operation. Sloan ignored him. Sloan, in effect, refused to signal HQ for permission. And in this he was abetted by Lieutenant Pitt who, though blinded by admiration for the Warden, was entitled, none the less, to look to him for orders. Ahead lay the valley and this spectacular company of poachers: Haggard had no alternative than to move with the team. If the team had remained within its boundary Inspector Haggard would, of course, be alive today.

'It is significant that Sloan sent no further signal. Between the time of entering the gorge and the time of losing the transmitter he had ample opportunity to send. He was lost to HQ; he was embarked on a private undertaking and it was his intention that he should be so lost.

'I now come to the field of error and miscalculation. There is the curious omission to inform the scouts Athumani and Jeru of his intention to attempt the rocky shelf of the gorge, the failure to make any kind of rendezvous: had the scouts made rendezvous later that day or the following morning there is little doubt that their skill and knowledge of the terrain would have brought Haggard to a place of safety. And there is the enormous error of judgment in seeking to negotiate this impossible path above the gorge, the elementary error of failing to chain the wheels, the lack of ordinary care which resulted in the loss or immobilisation of both the trucks.'

Meckiff wetted his lips. 'And then the accident itself. I won't pretend to be clear about this. I won't pass judgment on something

which happened in a matter of seconds in an alarming situation. But there is something here; something which lies in my mind and fills it with disquiet and will not be dismissed. Only you, Sloan, know the truth of this; whether Haggard's injury was avoidable, whether the truck could have been stopped in that moment when Maclaren shouted; whether, in fact, you knew it was Haggard and, if you knew, that made any difference to your resolve to keep your foot on the accelerator. I leave that to your conscience. What is clear is your subsequent treatment of Haggard, the callous indifference to an injury which you must have known would deteriorate rapidly in this climate. He needed attention, desperately. The proper course, the only course was to return; along trails with which you were familiar, on a course which, ultimately, must bring you within reach of assistance. But no. You were so besotted with this vision of desecration in the valley; so completely dominant of the men who were in your charge that nothing, virtually nothing would cause you to abandon the pursuit. You set off, carting this poor devil and his rotting leg deeper into the valley; fobbing him off with some facile story of help at the Forest Depot. Later, even this incredible piece of optimism had to be discarded. There was no help, no doctors, no drugs: nothing for Haggard but this sinking void of pain and creeping death. He was left without hope. You do not need imagination to know what that must have meant.

'Now at this point Ellis and Vanrennan became exhausted. They were not young men, they were not professionals. They decided to return.' Meckiff smiled with scorn. 'This, of course, was extremely good fortune. They were useless to you, a burden—and they provided a means of removing Haggard from your responsibility and, apparently, from your conscience. Small wonder that you made no attempt to dissuade, no decision to escort them and to give them the protection they needed so badly. You left them in the shadow of the forest, feeding a fire with wet brushwood, their hopes centred on making a few futile little smoke puffs on that enormous sky.' He was speaking, now, to Sloan. It seemed that the others had retreated, that he and Sloan were the protagonists, that that had been inevitable. 'You went further into the valley, you, Pitt and Maclaren; without weapons or equipment. Soon, this formidable horde of four hundred men had shrunk by half, had been split again into three. And when you finally closed with them what was the bag? An Asian; and seven primitives to whom a short term of imprisonment would be a deal more comfortable than their own rigorous lives, who would not own the means to pay the most modest fine.

Think of it, Sloan. This offering of trucks, equipment, a man's life and the self-respect of two decent men—all for eight miserable poachers.'

He began to toy with the cloth money-bag, shaking it so that he could hear the coins. Then he placed his hand on Haggard's wallet, rested it on the embossed surface. He felt one of the small Moorish symbols under his finger. 'There are two climaxes to this affair—the manner of Haggard's death and your assault on Mr Channa. They are related. They are the product of your own inbred fanaticism. You are driven by some fire of jealousy and I fear it will mount until——' He paused, searching Sloan's gentle face. Am I right? he asked himself in momentary doubt. Is this the man who would have pinned Channa's belly with the tusk? Sloan did not move or respond and there was no fervour in the eyes. He said gravely, looking from Ellis to Vanrennan: 'It is a terrible story; a helpless man left on that narrow parapet to be carried away on the flood like a stick of driftwood. He must have known that he was—alone. He must have heard the approach of that torrent of water and realised that there was no hope of deliverance. It is an evil thing to die with the knowledge that one is forsaken.' He stared at Ellis's streaked face. 'And yet I cannot find it in my heart to condemn you. Two faltering men and a stretcher-case abandoned in a wilderness; in such conditions of heat, exhaustion and inadequacy words like guilt and shame are, perhaps, no longer apt. The guilt, the true guilt'—he looked at Sloan—'lies with you. I think you know that.'

He gathered his papers, listened to the downpour. The river, soon, would lap in caressive greed at the stones of that lonely grave. He said: 'He was a shy man, painfully shy. I did not know him very well. There seemed to be nothing much to know, nothing one could grasp. I think he wanted the comfort of friendship but some perverse quality in him denied it.' He spoke softly; as if it were a kind of valediction for Haggard. 'He was aloof—because he had never learned how to avoid that state; cold—because he had never learned how to give or receive the warmth of human communion. I should never have sent him and I, too, must bear a portion of the guilt. But you, all of you, must share in it. You left him solitary in his personal crisis, ridiculed him, resented him. You gave him nothing except aloneness—and that was the condition in which he died.'

He put the papers and the folders into the case. 'I have made my decision. I will do nothing. I cannot charge a man for making wrong judgments—whatever his private motives. I have made a highly irregular agreement with Mr Channa which means, in effect, that I

can do nothing about the unsavoury incident of the wire in the ear. I have also to bear in mind two mitigating factors: one, that Sloan was assaulted and wounded by Channa while resisting arrest; two, that the poachers' transport was, in fact, available as Sloan predicted. Had it not been for that——'

He stood. The room had become oppressively hot. He felt his body yearn for the touch of rain, as if the flesh were arid like the soil of the plain. He watched it in the compound, on the roofs, its opaque bloom blenching the sky above the hills where the gorge lay. The gorge would be stirring with the renewed life of the river and there would be the new green heads of plants in its thirsting crevices. He knew that he would never go to the gorge, that Haggard must remain there. A majestic tomb for a man, he consoled himself: better than the dusty cemetery at Port of Kuru. But the thought of the grave would not leave him. A man ought not to be alone like that—even in dissolution. He said slowly, without turning: 'This obsession for animals and quiet paradises. . . .' They knew that he spoke now to Sloan. 'Who are you to say that a game-sanctuary is more beautiful than a wheat-garden? That a tall cedar is more beautiful than a factory-chimney? That a wild animal is more beautiful than a milch-cow?' He would not look at Sloan's still face and it seemed that a gulf widened and thrust them apart, that they could never reach each other, touch. He shook his head in rejection. 'I never liked fanatics. Too much has to be sacrificed for them.' A stem of bougainvillea broke under the beat of rain and he watched it part from the vine, trail forlornly across the rail of the veranda.

When the room had emptied of them Freeland said: 'I don't think we're going to get on, Sloan.'

'No.'

'This inquiry . . .'

Sloan nodded.

'It wasn't very edifying.'

'Should it be?'

'I think so. After all, a game officer's conduct . . .' Freeland smiled. The mouth was never in repose. It smiled perpetually, a mannerism without warmth. The hand went to the long black neck-hair, ruffled the ends, smoothed them again. 'Will you resign?'

'No.'

'It would be—preferable.'

'No.'

'All that equipment, a man's life. And the police . . .'

'I will not resign.'

'They never forget a thing like this. They will keep that file open, dust it, look at it on occasion. And one day . . .' The hands lifted. 'I know them. You heard what he said?'

'The Superintendent?'

'He said he was in a mood for reprisal.'

'I heard it.'

'You are not impressed?'

'No.'

'And you won't resign?'

'No.'

'It would be good for the Department.'

'But not for the game.'

'Aren't the two interests—identical?'

'They should be.'

Freeland nodded. 'I take your point. You were fond of Craven, weren't you?'

'Yes.'

'By that you mean he gave you lots of freedom.'

'I mean I was fond of him.'

'They say he will die.'

'Yes.'

The hand went from the neck-hair to the cheek, stroking, the cheek moving against the stroking fingers in an action that was sensuous, vaguely feline. Sloan watched the ruby and the white fingers and the pallid cheek with its faintly olive bloom beneath the skin, the black hair curling behind the ears. Freeland, he decided, lived in a predominantly tactile world, enjoying the feel of things, even the texture of his own flesh. The fingers kneaded delicately. He smiled. Soon, he thought absurdly, he will begin to purr.

'Do I amuse you?'

'No.'

Freeland stared in distaste at the room; its chairs were in disarray and there were drifts of tobacco-ash on the surface of the table, stains of dampness where the oilskins had dripped. He said: 'Whenever I take a new appointment I like to make one thing clear at the outset. And that is that I am a Jew. I'll repeat it. A Jew. You will be able to tell the staff. It will save all that talk in corners. You know the kind of thing—D'you think he's a Yid? He's got a conk like a Yid, I bet he's a Jew-boy.'

'We don't express ourselves like that.'

'No? Then that is unusual.'

'You can be a bloody Zulu for all I care.'

The fingers left the cheek. 'You seem to lack—respect.'

'Do I?'

'I think so.'

'You'll have to earn it.'

'I have to earn your respect?'

'Yes.'

'I told you we wouldn't get on.'

'You were right.'

Freeland stroked his small plump chest. 'You are hostile because I did not defend you against Meckiff. But why should I? I don't know you. And it was a disgusting story.'

'Yes. But I would not have left him on that rock.'

'You left him with Ellis and Vanrennan. That was the true moment of abandoning. Isn't that so?' Freeland picked up a sheet of typewritten paper and Sloan saw that it was the fragment from Kreb's bulletin. 'What are we going to do about this, Sloan?'

'About Quinn?'

'Yes.'

'Isn't that obvious?'

'No. It isn't obvious.' Freeland felt the paper between thumb and forefinger. 'I'll put my position. There's an offence here, yes. I've spoken to Quinn and he admits it. He apologises and I think he's sincere. Now, I'm always correct, Sloan. If you press this I'll have to support you. And Quinn will lose his licence. But I ask you—is it wise? A big safari company with such influence? A company that brings tourist money to the Territory? Is it sensible to antagonise them? And think of the repercussions. I've had a lot of experience, Sloan, and I can't see how the Game Department can be effective if it's at loggerheads with the professionals. We need the closest co-operation. Surely you don't dispute that?'

'I do dispute it. We're on the other side of the fence. We have to *control* them.'

Freeland shook his head. 'I can see we shall never agree. I, myself, have always turned a blind eye to the—peccadilloes of professional hunters.'

'Peccadilloes? You call the shooting of Royal Game a peccadillo?'

Freeland waved the paper. 'Are you going to withdraw this?'

'No.'

'I have to proceed with it?'

'Yes.'

'If an older man might offer advice——'

'I never take advice—especially from older men.'

The smile widened. Sloan felt disquiet. One wanted to respond, he thought, discovering the falsity of the smile, its illusory warmth, only in the moment of response. He caught the faint perfumed odour of Freeland's skin and he turned away, recoiling from the effeminacy of the man.

'Sloan,' Freeland said softly. 'Quinn went into the gorge for you.'

'I know that.'

'He didn't have to go.'

'No.'

'He found Ellis and Vanrennan.'

'Yes.'

'He saved them.'

'Maybe.'

'They might have died.'

'Yes.'

'Suppose they *had* died?'

'Well, they didn't.'

'No. But if there'd been a tragedy nothing could have saved *you*.'

'The charge stands.'

'That's your last word?'

'Yes.'

'I see.' Freeland replaced the sheet, weighted it on the table with an ash-tray. 'Paper-work, procedures, protests, representations from the Society of White Hunters, lobbying in bars and clubs, pressure from one source and another—all for one animal.'

'One rather splendid animal.'

'In exchange for Micky Quinn's licence?'

'That's it.'

'Don't you care for people at all?'

'Not much.'

'Only animals?'

'I care for animals and the land that produced them. I intend to keep both inviolate.'

'That's pompous.'

'Yes. But it's the way I live.'

Freeland nodded seriously. The smile disappeared for a moment. 'I don't dislike dedication in a man. But it won't work, you know. It's all too complex. Game, stock, agriculture, minerals, native peoples, settlers. Which interest is to be paramount? Who decides? Who is right?'

'It can never be right to destroy beauty.'

'Ah, beauty. You heard what Meckiff said. Who are you to decide what is beauty?'

'I don't decide. I know it when I see it, when I feel it.'

'You don't understand me, do you?'

'No.'

'Then I'll try to define myself.' The fingers were in the neck-hair again. 'I suppose, at root, I'm a biologist. I've had a very interesting talk with Bickerton and I'm sure we'll get on well together. We see things the same way, in a pure way, if you follow me.' The bright dark eyes narrowed. 'I see you don't. Well, look at it like this. I don't get emotional feelings about animals. They engross me deeply; but only in the head.' The fingers tapped the temples, then returned to the nape. 'This, all this . . .' he waved at the window and the rain-dark terrain . . . 'is a great natural laboratory. It contains a sum of knowledge which we ought to own, which we have to cull and express in print before it's too late. That's *my* personal vision of beauty, Sloan; not the shapes and colours of animals in spectacular landscapes and the airs of lonely valleys: but the beauty of pure knowledge. It's a matter of approach, of emphasis.' The eyes and the mouth smiled, this time with evident irony. 'The trouble with you is that you're old-fashioned. Your day is gone. You can't go on stomping around the plains and valleys, defending them as if they were the last sanctuaries of freedom left on this earth, fighting in odd corners like some jealous old buff. We have to move into the field of scientific game management.' He pointed to Bickerton's biomass-table. 'That's the kind of thing I mean. A new language; faunal ecology, game foods, population studies, cropping and survival rates, animal life in terms of metabolic activity . . . Yes, you may well grin. But my methods are likely to be of more value than this scrapping around water-holes, these savage little vendettas.' The small neat shoulders shrugged. 'I am the newest of new brooms. I have many schemes for research. I am a good administrator, and I plan to use the resources of this department to the maximum advantage. There will be a new census, special training for the scouts in the collection and mounting of plants, new marking techniques. There will even be a punch-card system for recording data. This department, Sloan, will no longer be a guerilla headquarters, but a——' he searched his mind for a phrase—'a Biological Field Station. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly. In the meantime I will get out into the field and make certain there are some animals left for the punch-card machine.'

'I am not joking.'

'No. But animals are not cyphers.'

'In a way they are.' Freeland sat. 'There's a reason for all this.'

'A reason?'

'For my being here. There isn't a lot of time.'

'I don't follow.'

'Do you know where I come from?'

'The Trans Kichuru.'

'Yes. Does that name convey anything?'

'Vaguely.'

'The big irrigation scheme. You must recall it.'

'I remember now.'

'Good. I am an expert on the eviction of game, Sloan. I think I am entitled to call myself that.'

'Is that why you're here?'

'Partly.' Freeland tapped his file. 'In your log you mention a meeting with a man from the Land Survey Division. You must have talked with him.'

'Yes.'

'Did he tell you what was in the wind?'

'Yes.' He stared disconsolately at the squalling rain. 'Yule was his name.' He had tried to force Yule's red-eyed enthusiastic face from his mind, refusing to contemplate it, refusing to dwell on the reason for Yule's presence in the gorge. The face had come, repeatedly, into his awareness—a thing of guile reforming behind his defences; he had banished it with the words of the man Scaward . . . 'there are so many schemes . . . many of them come to nothing'. He had clung to those words. Many of them come to nothing. To nothing. How could these two insignificant men be the harbingers of such despoilment? And yet he had known from his own refusal to face it that the fear was there: some deep cell of prescience had already recognised, even accepted, the existence of a threat. He felt suddenly cold. Freeland was speaking and the soft words came to him, touched him and drew his fear to the surface . . . 'There is to be a scheme, a great power and irrigation scheme that will transform the Suswa Basin. The valley will flood and the plain will be sealed against the migrations. We have to hurry. Something is disappearing that will never return. We have to glean and marshal every fact, every jot of information. We have to put it on record so that we can say in a year or two: there, it is gone—but we know about it; the knowledge preserved, indestructible. We will make it a model for the future. That's why they sent me, Sloan. I know what has to be done. I won't fight it as you and Craven would. Only a fool resists the

irresistible. But, my dear Sloan, you have to get this in perspective. You have to relinquish this private paradise of yours. The great dams of Africa—why, it's one of the sagas of history. Don't you see? You'll be at the centre of history.'

Sloan turned to look at him but there was now no irony in the face. The hand kneaded the cheek and the point of light from the ruby held his eyes and it seemed that the night already advanced from the plain, the room losing contour; the light of the ruby was also the light of danger, distant but approaching in the corridors of darkness.

Part 4

THE COFFER

AFTER THE HASTINGS LEFT Mababe Pitt sat by the port exit from where he would lead the stick and stared without interest at the faces of the troopers. The faces were very pale in the raw light of the aircraft, small under the big helmets. He loosened his scarf, tried to control the nausea which had swelled, predictably, in the pit of his stomach. Was it really seventeen months since they crossed the plain, followed the river through the gorge and into the valley? Look at it now. Look at the plain.

It was cut by a wide concrete access-road and he could see the shapes of vehicles moving to and from the site at Staedtler's Gorge. Some of the shapes were monstrous and ungainly and he knew that these were units of mechanical equipment. Down there, the steppe would vibrate with the noise of them. The silence of a wilderness had already passed and the game retreated and, soon, there would be other roads, a rail-track, rashes of concrete and corrugated-iron to blemish the clear red pelt of the plain. Somewhere down there, he thought, we bivouacked and listened to wind that came with the plaintive note of wild places, to the cataracts, to those same unchanging rhythms which men heard and interpreted an acon ago.

The road lifted with the rise of the terrain and he felt the aircraft gaining height to avoid the turbulence above the gorge. He saw the road divide, push thin urgent feelers into the hills flanking the gorge; there were pallid patches in the skin of the hills which were like the scars of erosion but which he knew were clearings for more of the concrete buildings. They were dedicated to concrete, he thought; these men who could thrust a road across an immense savanna because they had need of it, who could mould and fashion concrete, sculpt it so that it was no longer inert but lived in poised forms of grace. They used it like the clay of a new but soulless art.

Staedtler's Gorge lay there, beyond that turretted hill. The Hastings rose suddenly with the turbulence and, for a moment, he saw nothing but the summit ridges of the Ondes very distant above the wing, no more than a faint blue serration against a lighter blue. Then the wing dipped and he saw the head of the ravine and its flume of river-water and they flew parallel with it so that the gorge lay below them, a widening incision in the tiered basalt. He stared. He had not

seen the gorge since the days of the campaign and he had carried with him a memory of wild rock and sullen water and ineffable solitude, something that shone in the mind in vivid and feral colour and tapped strange springs of emotion. But now . . . The dispatcher leaned over, touched him. He heard the voice, strident above the noise of engines: 'Those French bastards know how to work all right, all right . . .' He nodded and he felt the man's hand leave his shoulder and a twist of sickness that had no origin in tension or in vertigo. The gorge had opened beneath him and the site lay perfectly displayed.

He had never seen such activity. Even at that height there was an impression of urgency and desperate effort. The flanks of the gorge worked like a broken ant-hill with the myriad forms of men and machines. He could see the small brown flowers of gelignite explosions in the fabric of the hillsides, cascades of rock and soil, a great crane, the claws of excavators ravenous in the body of the gorge. Skips of concrete moved on cables across the river, poised and emptied along the crescent of the coffer dam. Everything was unstill; the men, the machines, the river, the ravine itself seeming to shiver in spasms of disintegration. Upflung dust hung on the sky above the gorge in a rose-pink bloom. It hung there like a sectioned pearl and its colour was the colour of the earth of Mirembé. To the east, beyond the suspension footbridge, he saw a hill break under the gelignite and the red soil pour from the wound. It seemed that the gorge bled. He felt himself tremble and he turned away and stared at the burnished surfaces of the aircraft until the glare blinded him. Down there was the noise of drills and explosives and compressors and diesels, unimaginable clamour from the viscera of a hundred great machines; there—where once the beat of a wing had brought the heart to the throat. He closed his eyes against the glare and when he opened them the valley lay below and the site was behind them and he saw the reaches of riverine forest and the Suswa milk-white in sun and upstream, the concrete square of the new river-gauging station.

Kleinert watched the aircraft. He could see the colouring of the roundels, the red patches where the protuberances had been taped. It flew low over the Mission and toward the steppe, toward the concrete road that bisected it. He followed its aluminium gleam until he could no longer see it. 'There is something beautiful about an airplane,' he told Schreiber. 'It follows a true course. It is not indecisive like many birds. And there is a sense of destination.'

Schreiber filled his pipe. He had a lean, meditative face, clever eyes and a Latin skin which contrasted well with the white dry hair which he allowed to mass uncut above the ears. He said: 'You were telling me about Harry Sloan.'

'Yes. About Harry.' Kleinert had begun to pace the room. The room lay on the sunless side of the Mission and they could taste rather than see the ant-dust in the air. Later, when the evening sun fell obliquely through the window the dust would turn thickly in the beams and the room would look shabby and impermanent. 'It is strange that I should be able to talk to you like this. What is it? Twenty-five, thirty years? And now you are a designer of great bridges and dams, temples of modern living.' Kleinert smiled. 'You will not need a tombstone, André. There will be a score of shining memorials in ferro-concrete spread over the lands and rivers of the world.'

Schreiber nodded. 'I have often thought of it like that. Perhaps that is the true force behind it; the impulsion to leave something—endurable. It is work of utility. It is functional. But it *can* be art.' He lighted the pipe. 'I remember a bridge in the Haute-Vienne. It was small and inexpensive and its purpose was solely to support a given load of traffic, to link two growing agrarian regions. I drew it; and the contractors flung it contemptuously across the river in a record period because there was a bonus for its early completion. That was all there was to it: a drawing without fire, a structure assembled without dignity or respect. And yet it was beautiful. I remember walking across the old bridge which lay downstream and which would soon be demolished. It had great stone buttresses and three centuries of moss which covered the stone like wet green velvet. It was night and there was little light and I stared down into the water coiling around the piers. I looked up and the moon revealed itself and in that cold white light it seemed that I saw the bridge for the first time. It had true beauty. It achieved a perfect harmony; with the river, the banks and the land beyond, the town itself. It was a perfection which came from symmetry. Later, when the town grew new high buildings and the tree-line altered and the banks were shored into quays and moorings it lost its symmetry. It became ugly and unimpressive.'

'And what does that prove? That works of art are accidental?'

Schreiber smiled sadly. 'We are talking like students.'

'Yes. Like students. As it used to be. Flowery talk over the grounds of coffee cups. Striking sparks off each other's minds. Just as it used to be.'

‘Tell me about this Harry Sloan.’

Kleinert continued to pace. ‘He became morose after the death of the policeman. He came to us, to me and Mary, and complained that it would not leave his mind, that Haggard’s face lived there perpetually, that he could hear the voice in continuous rebuke. I told him that conscience was the one voice that none of us can silence, that not even the precious Romans up the hill could absolve him. I don’t know why I spoke like that. I’d had a hot and exhausting day. But his face changed and he said that if I was going to talk like a bloody priest he’d clear off. Well, I said, I *am* a bloody priest. He smiled rather dejectedly at that and he said he couldn’t whisper secrets through the grille of a confessional like the people up the hill but he’d tell us what happened. And he did. It was as I’ve told you; this relationship which grew on mutual detestation and which seemed to turn suddenly and bring them from opposite poles to a queer kind of closeness, almost to the fringe of love. It was like your bridge, André, something of unexpected quality forming from the basest of materials. He asked me what I thought and I said: “Harry. I have always been truthful and without truth I am of no value to you. You were wrong. You cannot put animals before men. I am a botanist and a naturalist and I loved this plain and its living creatures when you were nothing but a destroyer with a gun. But I tell you that not all the birds and animals of the whole of this continent, in all their wondrous forms, are worth the life of one good man thrown carelessly away.”’

‘And what did he say to that?’

‘There was a look of utter incomprehension on his face and I thought for a second that he was going to leave. Then he said: “You are still talking like a bloody priest. Always the same old theme of human life exalted above every other form. And why? Because you, yourself, are human and you cannot conceive that any form of life could have a value equivalent to your own. That is the basis of your religion. And in a moment you will tell me with considerable gravity that God made man in his own image. In fact, it is the other way round.” He stared at me and I said: “All right, Harry, I am a fake and there is no God and all the gospels are without wisdom. But tell me this: if a human life is expendable, if it is yours to devalue and discard why are you so afflicted with remorse?” “Because it was wasted,” he said. And then: “You do not understand me. I am not a sentimentalist over animals. I have never been a sentimentalist. I know them too well, the cycles of life and death in which they move. I know that peril and hazard is a condition of their freedom.

They are important because they are a product of space and silence. They are a product of freedom. Where they exist freedom exists. Destroy them and you build your own prison." He stared at me again and his rather beautiful face seemed to shadow and he said: "All you care about is freedom of the mind. You believe that is the only freedom worth preserving. But it is not true. It does not compare with the great physical freedom of running in sunlight and filling your lungs with the pure air of wild places, of surrendering yourself to the harmonies of other living things, of involving yourself in the true primal patterns for which you were born. It does not compare with the freedom of living by the senses, of measuring time by the sun and the flight of birds and the hunger in your belly. You take refuge in the mind because you have lost the art of living through the body. You have forgotten that the smell of a forest is more exciting than the smell of a book. You are only half alive." Then he muttered something and I said: "What was that?" And he smiled and he said rudely: "You should get your ears syringed."

Schreiber laughed. He watched Kleinert swiftly pace the room, the ugly face creasing, grimacing, always mirroring the flow of thought on its pliant surface. He had begun to sweat from his exertions. The pastor said: 'Always, when he is cross with me, he tells me to get my ears syringed.' The little finger went without conscious direction to the ear, probed for the wax which lay against the drum.

'Yes,' Schreiber said. 'I remember those ears.' He leaned back in his chair, linked his hands behind the neck so that the hair stood out in a soft white halo.

'I am not much of a priest,' Kleinert said. 'One has the faith, the spirit; but, like everything else, it needs presenting. People don't take me seriously.' He stared. 'You would have made a good priest. All that brown skin and silver hair. You'd have been a bishop in no time.' He stopped pacing, pirouetted on his heel. 'I am a good teacher. So I try to awaken them through teaching, do it in that way. But they will not take it from a funny little man with a carrotty head. They elude me.' He smiled wanly. 'Did you ever hear of a bishop called Old Gingerbread?'

'No.'

'That is what they call me.'

'Jan,' Schreiber said seriously. 'Why have you told me about Harry Sloan? Why are you afraid?'

'Listen,' Kleinert said. He held up his hand. They heard the scratch of insects in the wall; and beyond it, distant, a low mechani-

cal undertone. 'That is the sound of vehicles moving through the steppe. The sound never stops. Even at night you can see the headlamps crossing in a continuous stream of light, across the plain to Staedtler's Gorge. Men, materials and machines are fed without cessation into the enormous hungry maw that you, André, have created for us. I remember . . .' He paused, looking backward in time to when the plain was remote and they had felt its presence like a dark and murmurous sea flowing dangerously to the edge of the settlement. 'I remember those early days when we would cross the plain with Harry and the Maclaren boys. These were true journeys of discovery, expeditions requiring care and preparation. Now, it is an easy drive down a concrete road. Soon, there will be more roads, a railway, an airstrip to serve the town that will grow above the gorge. And the valley itself . . .' He looked earnestly into Schreiber's face. 'You are going to destroy the valley. You have sat in consultation with financiers of the World Bank, with engineers from the Department of Irrigation and the Hydro-Electric Power Commission, with accountants and contractors and Commissioners from the Native Affairs Department; a million words and resolutions bound into minute-books to pursue an act of destruction. All this weight of argument and decision tipped into the scales against the plain and the gorge and the Suswa Valley.' He smiled. 'Well, concepts of beauty, peace and antiquity do not weigh very much. You cannot grasp them and say to a Committee: Here, this is what we offer in return for electric power and industrial wealth. You cannot say to this Committee of bankers and politicians: Here is a plain across which the migrations and the nomads move on immemorial trails; here, an ancient gorge in which man the toolmaker first stepped toward his destiny; here, a silent valley in which it is possible to feel the breath of Creation itself, in which a truth of immeasurable significance sometimes pricks the darkness of the mind like a point of pure light. You cannot give weight to these abstractions; you cannot even present them with conviction. So the plain will go, the gorge will be a monument of modern concrete. And the valley and its hidden truth will drown under a lake of mounting water.'

Schreiber laughed again. 'It would make a good sermon.'

'It *was* a sermon.'

'Ah, that explains it.'

'I am quite serious.'

'Tell me,' Schreiber said. 'What do these animals of yours do when their haunts are invaded?'

‘They retreat.’

‘Yes. They retreat. They find new wildernesses. And that is what your Harry Sloan must do.’

‘Some of them stay,’ Kleinert said miserably. ‘They blunder about, trample the crops, menace the stock, refuse to be evicted. In the end they are destroyed.’ He had begun to pace, turning vigorously at the end of each measured walk. Like a caged animal, Schreiber thought. He could sense the agitation in the pastor’s mind. The fluting voice said: ‘Yesterday I went again to the gorge. There is talk of a school for the European children. Already there are four hundred Europeans on the site; further down, a settlement of eight hundred Africans. Families are arriving every day. Something must be done for the children; soon. I spent an hour with the Engineer, a thin, feverish-looking man in a forage-cap—’

‘Languirand?’

‘Yes. That is the name. I stared at the indescribable chaos and I asked him where he would put the school, how long would it take to build. ‘I would place it on the perimeter of the camp,’ Languirand said. ‘Against the plain where the air will be clearer and the noise less intense.’ “But that will take time,” I told him. He smiled and he said: “These villains of mine will throw steel and concrete and timber together and within a week you will have a fine school—better than anything you have in Mirembé.”’

‘Yes,’ Schreiber said. ‘They will do that—quite casually. There will also be a medical centre.’ He smiled. ‘Perhaps even a church.’

‘I do not want a church,’ Kleinert said. ‘I will leave that to the Romans. The school will be my church. And it will be for all the children; European and coloured. I told Languirand and he shrugged and he said it did not signify anything and that I could do as I pleased.’ Kleinert stopped by the window, stroked his round ginger head. ‘André, I have never seen such a camp. I described it as chaos; but, of course, it isn’t. It is all enormously purposive. They are attacking that gorge as if it were some kind of personal enemy. Explosive, grabs, drills, excavators—the gorge seems to reform continuously before one’s eyes. I saw the summit of a hill taken off with gelignite as cleanly as you and I might spoon off the top of an egg. Great overhangs of stone split from the body of the hills and plunge with a noise like thunder. One feels unsafe; as if one stood in the midst of a gathering and total disintegration. Fine pink dust falls like a mist of coloured rain. And the machines! Such power! Biting and gulping cliffs of stone which even the river could not shake in a million years of flood and torrent.’ The pastor raised his

hands in astonishment. 'If they had told me they had a machine to move mountains I would have believed them. We drove slowly in Languirand's open truck with its pretty little Engineer's flag, past the French camp and those long concrete dormitories and down to the African colony. The Africans are living under jute shelters sprayed with cement. You can see the bodies of sleek black rats moving in their refuse. We turned for the mouth of the gorge. Ahead, they were working high in the wall and we stopped on a signal from a group of men and there was a brief pause in which we waited for the explosion. When it came the wall seemed to collapse and the red soil spattered across our helmets. They examined the fall and a man came forward to the truck. He said to Languirand: "Engineer, there is something here . . ." We got out of the truck and went over to the rockfall and the man pointed. There were a number of heavy boulders and slivers of stone and Languirand bent and brushed the dust and soil from the surfaces and we saw the shapes of animals painted in fading red and blue ochres. I felt a great surge of excitement and I said: "These are cave-paintings." I looked up at the scarred cliffs of the gorge and I saw the mouths of caverns like shadows in the rock-faces and I held Languirand's arm and I said: "We should preserve this." The man inquired: "Engineer . . . ?" And Languirand shook his head and I heard him say: "Forget it." He looked at me with those deep yellowish eyes of fever and he said: "We must forget it. We cannot stop work for the archaeologists. They would be down on us, measuring, roping off, picking in the earth like grave baboons. No, no. We must forget it." We climbed into the truck, drove off. I looked back and already the mechanical shovel had bitten into those priceless slabs and I felt heavy in the heart and I stared across the river to the slopes that ran down to the mouth. A man was standing there—high in the rock and vegetation. It was too distant to distinguish features but I knew from the way the yellow hair and beard caught the light that it was Harry Sloan. He stood quite still and he was watching the scene in the gorge. Then I saw him make a kind of hopeless gesture, turn away.' Kleinert crossed from the window, touched Schreiber's shoulder. He said urgently: 'Don't you see what this is doing to him? He is beside himself. He is there by day and by night, prowling in the crags, watching, building up Heaven knows what terrible pressures. What will happen? He is not one to retreat, to compromise, to make graceful acceptances. He will fight.'

Schreiber shook his head. 'There is nothing to fight. It is not a private project. It is a national scheme and it has gone beyond the

stage of petition and protest. Nothing Sloan can do can affect the outcome. There will be a dam—and power and irrigation. That seems to me to be a good exchange for the wild places.' He smiled with affection. 'Even if the breath of Creation does blow through them.'

'The spirit has gone already. It has been driven out. It can only survive in stillness and solitude. It cannot live with man.' Kleinert grimaced with such violence that Schreiber was repulsed by the wrinkling face. 'If I had any doubts it would be because of that; that man is shown so often to be an interloper.'

'Careful,' Schreiber said in mock gravity. 'You are on the verge of heresy.'

'I cannot get it out of my mind,' Kleinert said. 'That gorge—how long to form? How many ages of the river's infinite purpose? And now; they assault it with gelignite and machines and in a few months . . .' He opened the window, listened. He could hear the sound of Mary Kleinert's voice, the chant of children. 'Do you know, André, they have a crane there which they call Goliath? It is so large that its great steel legs stand astride the buildings. Languirand told me with pride that it is two hundred feet high and that it will lift four hundred tons. Imagine pride in a monster like that! I could not take my eyes from it. I felt uneasy. It seemed to dominate them, its shadow on their faces, its incredible strength. Like a kind of steel fetish which they would take with them across the world to wherever this ritual of dam-building would be performed. And the camp itself . . . Despite the machines, the techniques of engineering, the camp has assumed a strange early character.' He hesitated. 'As if it is not of this century. It is difficult to describe. It has impermanence, immense vitality, colour. It has attracted a wreckage of men and women from all over Africa. One sees black, yellow and red faces, gaudy clothes and brilliant turbans. There are boarded sidewalks, snatches of French dialect, Indian smells of curry and spices and incense. It is a feverish place in which everyone moves with urgency. It is swelling daily. And one senses an undercurrent of violence, a passion which is concentrated on the dam but which may flow into other, more dangerous channels. It is so difficult to express this. But the camp is almost entirely alien. It is not of this century; it is not of this land. It is French—but with that hint of decadence, that heightened colour which the French seem to create in exile.' Kleinert smiled. 'One would not be surprised to see a white paddle-steamer from New Orleans appear at the bend of the river.'

Schreiber said slowly: 'I will tell you of this company, Alpe-Mounie Consortium. I have been intimately connected for a dozen years. Alpe-Mounie has built the first stage of three barrages to my design; the first and second in Haute-Savoie, the third in the Kelantan in Malaya. This, at Staedtler's Gorge, is the fourth. It is a strange organisation. Within the soft skin, as it were, of finance and administration lies this iron core of men who go to wild and inaccessible places, tame and alter the course of rivers, translate dreamers' schemes into steel and concrete. Most of them were bred to alpine work; dams, bridges, tunnels, mountain railways: great projects in which natural forces are challenged—and subdued. Their work is majestic. It is never puny and insignificant, always conceived on so formidable a scale that, for a century, men will stare and say: This was a feat. Do you understand me?'

'Yes.'

'I express myself in these terms in order that you may understand the nature of these men. They are simple, with a thread of savagery and some of that brooding force of the mountains from which they come. They are fiercely proud. They are aware, even if they do not rationalise it, of the grandeur of their work. And for that reason they are contemptuous of other men. They are withdrawn. They are arrogant and jealous. They drink and fornicate with sullen enthusiasm. They have created, at the heart of Alpe-Mounie, the kind of *esprit* which exists in certain regiments. But, for them, it springs from traditions of struggle in the face of enormous natural obstacles.'

Schreiber began to twist his hair into long white feathers. 'It is not even a pride in technical accomplishment. It goes deeper than that. They pit themselves against the breasts of mountains and the power of rivers—and they win. There is something elemental in the struggle and they draw their own primitive and tireless power from the machines with which they work. Does that resolve your unease about Goliath?'

'It all sounds—godless.'

'Yes. In a sense there is no god but Goliath. He is the symbol of power. I have seen his gaunt shape tower against alpine glaciers, terrains of equatorial jungle, desert skies. And always he seems to symbolise strength, the ultimate victory of machines.'

'His shape?' Kleinert repeated with disgust. 'He seems to symbolise? We are talking of a crane.'

Schreiber shrugged.

'A piece of metal,' Kleinert persisted, 'which will not work unless

men tend it, will not even move unless men operate it.' He heard the vehemence in his voice. Why am I so affected by Goliath? he asked himself. He folded his handkerchief, patted his face. He saw again the legs astraddle the roofs, the steel talons embedded in the earth. The sun had been low and the shadow of the crane lay stamped on the concrete road and he had driven along the road, along the shadow, and the shadow beat against his face like unfelt blows and there was an illusion that he ascended the crane and when he reached the clear unshadowed road beyond the grotesque spire he had felt relief.

'You spoke of a ritual of dam-building,' Schreiber said. 'Which was perceptive of you. Because that is what it is—a ritual that never varies; the shifts, the procedures, the rigid hierarchies, the faded flag on the Engineer's truck which must never be removed, the jargon of language which has become incomprehensible to the outsider, the laws of conduct, even the fighting which is done by custom with mattocks under the crane. Yes, you could call it a ritual. There are ceremonies to mark the completion of certain stages of the barrage which would cause you disquiet.' Schreiber smiled. 'I would not be surprised if there is not a sacrifice to Goliath.'

'You are joking.'

'Yes. I am joking. But only with respect to the sacrifice.' He shifted in the chair to face Kleinert. 'There will be no police-law. This cell of men will accept nothing beyond its own self-imposed code, its own harsh brand of punishment. It will look to the authority of the Chief Engineer and the Camp-Master—but no further. The settlement will grow and will be shaped and styled according to custom. The African colony will be known as the Casbah, the square in the township where the prostitutes live will be named Place des Anges; and the bar where all will drink with great seriousness will be known as Bar Chancre. These are names of tradition.' The lean face became anxious. 'Jan, do you realise the kind of city which will form? In which you will work? There will be a great deal of money in the pockets of these men and, what is worse, in the hands of the Africans. It will seem to you that every whore and gambler, every pedlar of vice and drugs in Africa has come to the dam for the pickings.'

'That will please the Romans. They like nothing better than a good, old-fashioned sink of iniquity.'

Schreiber said abruptly: 'Have you met the Camp-Master?'

'No.'

'His name is Férol. He is a Corsican. There are many legends about him. They say he is the strongest man in the world, that he has

had the syphilis twenty-three times, that he can copulate all night without cessation, that he needs no sleep, that he was a slaughterer and that his strength derives from the quantities of hot blood which he drank in the abattoir; all the stories which men generally graft on to a man of exceptional stature. He plies no trade. His concern is discipline, he is the centre of authority, he is indisputably the master. He walks among those hard and sombre men and they give him respect, obedience. He is a barbaric figure, with a naked torso and a ragged black moustache and a blue bandanna which he knots around the forehead beneath his helmet——'

'And gold rings in the ears?'

Schreiber smiled again. 'He *is* like a brigand.' He stood and Kleinert came from the window and they listened to the children, Mary Kleinert's patient voice. Kleinert beat chalk-dust from his sleeve and Schreiber watched the violent blows of the palm. He said gently: 'You haven't changed, you know.'

'Where do you go now?'

'To Alpe-Mounie. To Languirand. He has become anxious. It is strange but on every barrage there is a sudden but fleeting loss of confidence. It is predictable. It will pass. There are suspicions of the bedrock, there are fissures, there has been a subterranean earth shock; something like that. They require the reassurances of André Schreiber and there will be many grave discussions. And the anxiety will prove to be groundless.'

'I will come with you to your car.'

Schreiber nodded, put his arm around the pastor's thin shoulder. He said seriously: 'Do not condemn the dam too soon. Wait. Remember the bridge on the Vienne. You may be surprised.' He searched the white-lashed eyes but there was no response and he knew that the crane still stood stark in Kleinert's mind. How close is he to Sloan? he asked himself: how near to Sloan's philosophy? He squeezed the shoulder and the face puckered and they stepped from the Mission into the pale wash of sun.

2

EMMA KLEINERT COULD NOT see the coffer dam from the windows of the medical centre. The centre was a low building in cement bricks with a curved central pillar fashioned in concrete.

Red tiles had been worked cunningly into its apex to form a cross. The tail of the cross was long and slender so that the symbol served also as a Cross of Lorraine, this having a special significance for Languirand. There was a small dispensary, a room which Brooke used for surgery and a ward with six alloy beds. The medical centre adjoined the school. The two buildings were interconnecting and it was possible to pass immediately from the odour of disinfectant to the scents of chalk and panting children. These latter were the scents of nostalgia. They possessed her, drew her back along the short, discernible path to adolescence. She resented this drag of past whose tow she could feel faintly but ever present. It was like a power which sought to reclaim her. She resented it: but there were times when the resentment dissolved into a yearning for return, when the faint drag took her almost without resistance. She could walk through the white corridor, open doors to hear her father's voice rise suddenly in fluting cadence; the face would crease with pleasure and it would be there, all there, that chalky, chanting womb of protection. It would close around her, the walls thick against a world in which things fought and moved in merciless light.

But these were separate worlds. The corridor led back to the hospital world where Brooke's face sweated with half-feared desire and hands came moist and unfirm against the flesh of the arm; and, beyond Brooke's world, the world of the dam. This was the world, she knew, which had frightened her and sent her like a thing of fragility in search of shelter. The dam-world, Férol's world, was violent and vivid, sour with struggle like the smell of a man who has forced his body to too great an effort. And there were other smells. They came with the wind of the river. They had soil and urine in them and the smell of semen in them; a smell of fertility as if the gorge, raped, yet spilled its own seed against the erect steel thrust of the machines. Why should she know that smell? She was virgin and no man had ever lain emptied across her; no hand, redolent of it, had touched her face. But she knew the smell. It went from the nostrils to the pit of the womb and it was like the breaking skin of ripe fruit smelled in the dusk and coming like an essence of the night to stir and reveal secret places which needed desperately to be opened. It was the smell which hung on the metal claws and tongues of the machines and there had been an evening when she had walked with Alan Pitt beneath the glare of arc-lamps through the legs of Goliath and past the depot where machines lay dormant. They had stopped, averting their heads slightly so that they stared under the silver channels of the beams. The flanking hills were grey behind the

beams, grey with coiled foliage, and the moonless sky leaned in walls of impenetrability to contain this cell of bright white motion. The crane swung continuously across them and she felt its limb reaching above her from the shores of night in ellipses of enormous power, watched the girders of shadow on the broken ground.

She had put her hand behind her and the fingers sank into the raw soil which stuck to the blade of one of the giant scoops. On an impulse she lifted her hand to her nostrils, breathed of its scent, this scent which was compounded of roots and rock and the foetid matters of the earth. The scent went in waves of feeling through her own deep tissues, became weakness. Something moved within her womb and, momentarily, she was like a plant opening, opening, exposing its ovules so that they might live, not die unfulfilled. He had sensed the change in her, the urgency; and he had turned and held her and the crane darkened then left his face and she felt his own responding urgency and his desire swollen between them and he whispered: 'Come with me now, Emmy. Don't think about it. Come now.' She had wanted to go with him, to submit in some dark glade away from the dam where there would be silence and the smells of seed and night-flowers but she had looked upward and the arm of the crane moved on the sky, traced by the shed glare of the lamps, and she had felt her wanting link inexplicably with the power of the crane and she had pushed him away: he stood there in his tender boy's-body and she had stared contemptuously. He would give her caresses where she wanted pain, timidity where she wanted force, warmth where she wanted fire. The words nearly came: 'You can't give me what I need', but she shook her head and she said: 'Take me back, Alan.'

She could not see the coffer dam from the windows or from the tar road which led from the hospital (as Brooke and Nurse Smythe preferred to call it). The dam site lay within the mouth of the gorge and it was only by walking the quarter-mile along the road and through the wadis and the basalt jaw that the head of Goliath exposed itself. He was distant, dwarfed by the gorge, and the steel skeleton seemed small, almost delicate: the crane dipped into the site like the proboscis of a gaunt black insect. The road led past out-buildings—rectangles of concrete and corrugated-iron whose roofs, from a distance, winked in sunlight like dull glass studs set in the brown-green walls of the gorge; at the end of the road was the French camp and the settlement and the growing township and, below it, the curve of the coffer and the half-moon of fine pink dust which gave the scene a lurid and unreal appearance. She would not

take the road to the site without escort. It was there; that pit of violence and desperate effort in the sun and she could hear it and taste it in the throat and sense its tempo quickening from day to day as men and machines converged from Mirembe and distant places of the Territory. It was easier to turn to the plain and walk through wadis until the noise retreated and the plain lay in serene vistas beyond the fringes of papyrus.

The medical centre and Kleinert's school had been built on rising ground at a height above the flood-plain sufficient to escape danger when the rains came. Behind the school an area of scrub had been cleared by one of Languirand's machines, then fenced: and it was there that the children of the school and the children attending the hospital gathered at certain periods of the day.

Many children came to the hospital. The Suru had moved in their slow nomadic way from the valley to the gorge where the young men could earn wealth from labour at the site: they had brought indolence, a developing greed—and a legion of chigger fleas. The chiggers proliferated in the dry, sandy soil of the western valley from whence they came. Many of the Suru were afflicted with trachoma and it was these, the blind, the half-blind and the flea-ridden, who came enthusiastically to the hospital. There was always a morning procession of dark-brown flesh wound around the concrete pillar as far as the school-house door. The treatment was free and novel; there were injections for the eyes, pyrethrum powder and lysol and vaseline; even soap (which could be made to produce strange effects in water) and antiseptic dressings (which could be worn proudly like ornaments).

Emma Kleinert was drawn constantly to the children, to the patch of cleared scrub still scarred by the machine and around which small blind figures sometimes paraded. She liked to watch them; these dark, stick-limbed waifs moving slowly on the perimeter against the mist-blued plain. At these times an immense pity stirred her: a pity which seemed to swell and feed on those same unbearable yearnings which had sprung within her that night under the crane. It confused her; this commingling of love, compassion and sexual longing. Rivers of emotion flowed inside her, flowed, it seemed, from a common fount; flooded her so that she could give and give and give with liberality to all—to the blind and the diseased and the undernourished and to the man who would tap the springs of desire.

From the window of the dispensary she saw the 'plane lift upward from where the African settlement would be. It had been spraying

against tsetse and it came on a rising parabola across the gorge, turned into the sun. She went from the window to the mirror which was set in the wall by the steriliser, stared at her image. Then she removed her cap, unpinned the hair and let it fall. Brooke's voice said: 'It's beautiful hair.'

She flushed. She had not heard him enter. She said: 'Miss Smythe says I must cut it.'

'Miss Smythe,' Brooke said contemptuously. 'Miss Smythe is bald. Did you know that?'

'No.'

'It's true. I saw her without her cap. The hair is like seaweed curled around little islands of grey scalp.' She felt him move nearer to her. The rich voice said: 'You mustn't cut it, Emma.'

'I shouldn't?'

'Of course not. It's too beautiful to cut.'

'I'll tell Miss Smythe.' His face, now, had appeared in the mirror. It was a florid face, deeply-jowled, always carefully shaved and powdered. The mouth was full and plump as if blood coursed strongly through the lips. She saw them move and the voice said: 'What do you mean—you'll tell Miss Smythe? That I admired your hair or that you needn't cut it?'

'That I needn't cut it.'

The face nodded. 'That's all right.' She saw the lie coming. 'I'm not afraid of Miss Smythe.'

She laughed.

Brooke smiled, the smile that was designed to reveal his lustrous teeth. 'Well, just a little bit. Even Férol is afraid of Miss Smythe.'

She picked up the cap.

'No, don't put it on,' Brooke said. 'It's beautiful hair.'

'It's ginger.'

'No. It's red.'

'Ginger. That's what Harry calls me.'

'Harry? Who's Harry?'

'Never mind.'

'It's red with deep crimson lights in it—like those junipers in the valley.'

'Too early for poetry.'

The fulsome smile again. 'How d'you get it all under the cap?'

'Pins.'

'Just pins?'

'I coil it on the top and pin it.'

'And it doesn't fall down?'

'No.' She watched the intent face. She thought: there is something wrong with a man who can discuss a woman's hair with such seriousness. The face moved nearer.

Brooke said: 'May I touch it?'

'No.'

'There's nothing in that. It's like feeling a piece of silk—the texture, you understand? It's not like touching your—body.'

'I have to go now. Miss Smythe——'

'Damn Miss Smythe.' She felt his hand lift the hair, take its weight on the palm. The face in the mirror was concentrated and she saw the tongue moisten the full pink lips. She turned to face him and the hair swung behind her and he stood there, the hand still raised and slightly cupped. She saw the strain in the eyes and she knew with sudden insight that Brooke was afraid; afraid of the final intimacies, of the sexual act. He was like a child drawn to the fringe of something fearful, approaching the warmth of danger and then recoiling. She leaned toward him and parted her lips but the handsome face moved back. He would touch and finger, she thought; feel her hair and allow his moist hand to brush the flesh of her arm when they passed in the ward, circle desperately around the thing he feared. But that was all. She smiled and he saw the smile and understood and turned away. She gathered her hair, pinned it, replaced the cap. Brooke had gone to the further wall and she heard him rip a square of paper from the calendar, crush it.

He said: 'This lieutenant——'

'Pitt?'

'The fair-haired boy.'

'What about him?'

'I saw you with him.'

'Yes?'

'At the camp. By the crane.' He was smoothing the scrap of paper, restoring it carefully to a crumpled square. 'I saw you.'

She shrugged.

'Is that Harry? Harry Pitt?'

'His name's Alan.'

'Alan Pitt?'

'Yes.'

'Then who is Harry?'

'Oh, someone.'

He said sharply: 'Don't be silly, Emma.'

'I'm not being silly.' This was a game, familiar to her.

'I'm too old to be teased.'

'He likes my hair, too.'

'Harry?'

'No. Alan.'

'Alan likes your hair?'

She nodded.

'Does he—stroke it?'

'Continually.'

'Yet he calls you Ginger.'

She shook her head. 'That was Harry.'

'And what does Alan call you?'

'Miss Lilytrotter.'

He frowned. 'A private joke . . . ?'

'It's an animal. A small dainty animal. And it does just that.'

'It trots on water-lilies?'

'Yes.'

'I don't believe it.'

She shrugged again.

He conceded: 'It's a good name for you.' He was looking at her hair.

She said: 'Harry strokes it too.'

The face flushed with annoyance. 'Stop it, Emma.'

'He wants me to cut it off,' she lied. 'Really short.'

'You're joking'

'Cropped,' she said, without pity.

'But that would be criminal. All that beautiful red hair.' He came from around the desk. 'You couldn't do it.'

She studied him. Like one of those fake doctors in the advertisements, she thought; the spotless gown with the tunic neck, the brown forearms and the gold wristlet-watch, the groomed head and its grey, brilliantined side-waves with the divisions from the teeth of the comb still showing in them. And the face: the face which was a caricature of dignity and intelligence, slipping easily into the mask of confidence. But she had seen him in the ward, in the small theatre, the face sweating in fear over a simple fracture.

'Would you really do it?'

'Oh, yes. Nurse Smythe doesn't like it. And Mummy and Daddy aren't keen. And it's too long and thick for this heat.' She saw his eyes assess her, read her.

He said, with relief: 'I'm glad it's only a game.' Then: 'How old are you?'

'Twenty.'

He repeated it: 'Twenty. I don't understand you, Emma. You are

innocent, like a child. You love the children and when you are out there in the back it seems that you are one of them. And yet you have this terrible knowledge.'

'We are born with it,' she said gravely. 'All of us.' She heard footsteps cross the empty ward. 'That's Miss Smythe.'

Miss Smythe came in. Brooke watched her. She was a large woman in the middle age with high, heavy breasts which swelled her apron into a wide curve of linen like an inflated sail. She was pigeon-chested, Brooke decided. But no: a pigeon was altogether too insignificant a bird. The breasts came aggressively into rooms like the prow of a ship. A swan, he thought; not a pigeon, a swan. A great swan with a fine white breast moving with obese grace. He greeted her and he saw the eyes flicker in response, go to the floor. She was a woman who entered rooms and looked at floors; searching always for the paper, the pins, the threads of cotton, the clots of hair which caused her such unease. She bent, retrieved a hairpin. She said coldly, 'We don't drop hairpins in the dispensary, Nurse Kleinert.' The voice was contralto, so unexpectedly deep that it excited an immediate and pleasurable emotion. 'There's been an accident,' it told them. 'There's a man outside.'

'An accident?' Brooke asked. Trepidation touched his voice. 'What kind of accident?'

'The man will tell you. A fall of some kind. There are four casualties.'

'Four!'

Miss Smythe nodded. She had heard his dismay, understood its source. How did he qualify? she asked herself. She sniffed; the disinfectant could not disguise the smell of concrete which had not dried out. She had a round face, with a fine opaque complexion which she attributed to soap and rainwater and a regular intake of sulphur tablets. She was also a devotee of the Complete Breath; right deep down into the abdomen, she told her friends. She watched Brooke, breathed completely. The white sail billowed and she turned as if under its impetus, left the room.

They followed.

An open truck waited in the sun. There were four sitting men. A man in calico trousers and a bright red shirt stood by the wing. He had black hair growing from a peak low on the forehead, powdered with dust; an arrogant, ruddy face, youthful and vigorous. He announced: 'I am Zeffirelli.' He spoke with pride as if the name should convey something.

Brooke waited. 'All right,' he said. 'You are Zeffirelli.' He

looked quickly at the men in the truck. Three were smoking. A good sign, he thought. Perhaps they are not badly injured. But the fourth? He said: 'I am the Chief Medical Officer.'

Zeffirelli nodded. 'Ah, good. The Chief Medical Officer.' The face puckered in curiosity. 'There are other doctors?'

'No,' Brooke said. He felt suddenly ridiculous. 'But there will be soon.'

Zeffirelli nodded again. The deep bright eyes were malicious. He stroked his hair and cement-dust came up in a small cloud. 'I see.' The shapely mouth smiled. He was staring now at Emma Kleinert and Miss Smythe saw him preen himself. 'I see.' He spoke in the throat with a thick Breton accent.

Miss Smythe said: 'Shouldn't we bring them in?'

'It was a fall,' Zeffirelli said casually. 'A fall down a shaft. Thirty, perhaps forty feet. They worked on a platform and the cable, you comprehend me, slipped from the brake drum.'

Brooke stared anxiously. 'Forty feet.'

'Yes. On to concrete.'

Brooke turned to Miss Smythe. The large chest and the shrewd eyes, the weight and the dependability of the woman were suddenly desirable. He knew that he needed her. 'We'll get them in,' he said.

Zeffirelli touched his arm. The face had lost its humour. The Breton voice said firmly: 'Alpe-Mounie are used to good doctors. Very good doctors.'

Brooke nodded. 'Let's get them in.' He rubbed his stomach where the anxiety had settled in a vaguely felt pressure. He looked again at Miss Smythe, at the mockery in the eyes. He caught her clean, soap-and-water smell. She said unpleasantly, so low that the others would not hear: 'Never mind. You have become a great specialist on the chigger-fleas.'

Bickerton said: 'Would you like me to drive?'

'No.' Sloan took the Land Rover slowly along the line of the fence. The sun was already low and the fence threw a long shadow and the truck moved through the shadow. It lay ahead of them in a pattern of stilettos. The sky reflected the lake to the baked surface of the plain in pools of blackness like the glow of tar.

'It's some fence,' Bickerton said, with admiration. 'Just look at it.'

'That's what I'm doing,' Sloan said irritably. 'I'm looking at it. That's why I'm here—to look at the fence.'

'Will it really withstand elephant?'

'Yes.'

'Even if they charge it?'

Sloan did not answer.

'I know I say silly things,' Bickerton said. He heard Athumani stir in the fuel-drums at the rear of the seats. He looked behind and Athumani grinned, made a looping gesture with his hand as if it leapt an imaginary obstacle. 'Elephant jump high,' Athumani told him. Bickerton flushed, turned and stared through the windshield. It was starred with little pellets of insect blood: the minute wings which stuck in the blood trembled with the motion of the truck. He half-closed his eyes and the wings became faintly iridescent. He began to play idly with the box of hypodermic syringe darts. Then he removed the paper-clip from his notebook, opened it, read the entries. 'There's not much here,' he said. 'Not much for a day's work.' He closed the book. 'Three male impala immobilised and marked,' he said. 'All with pretty plastic car-tags and painted horns.' He looked sideways. He was afraid of Sloan. Sloan, he thought, seemed to move in another dimension, rarely speaking, going through the actions but withdrawn and aloof as if he were no longer involved. The mouth, almost obscured by beard, was sullen. The truck slowed. They were near the lake and he could see the change in light, intensified by the glare of salt-pans. Sloan stopped the truck, cut the engine. They were immersed in silence. Then they heard the sounds of the lake; the wind in rushes and distant bird wings beating close to the surface of water so that the echoes seemed to skate like thrown stones.

Sloan pointed. 'You see?'

Bickerton followed the line of the finger. The short rain had failed and the season had been unusually dry and the lake had shrunk to expose its shelves of grey-white bed. The shrinking had left the end of the fence two hundred metres short of the water.

'So much for the fence,' Sloan said. 'Now, they just go round it.' He took the Land Rover in a slow circle where the ground was tussocky. Bickerton stared at the tussocks. They grew thick bleached grass like shocks of hair so that there was an impression that they drove through a scattering of giant faceless heads. It was always like that, he decided; always, out here, one was confronted suddenly with the grotesque: as if the country deliberately twisted its face into an alien contour. But Sloan wouldn't feel it like that, he thought. This was Sloan's homeland. Sloan understood it, roamed in it, was another profile of it. A queer bastard. But he'd changed in the last year or so. He had always been aloof, rather contemptuous

of the people on the lab and the admin side: but the aloofness had been mellowed by a kind of melancholy humour and they had learned to accept him, even to understand the strange instinct for withdrawal which had made the Warden a solitary, suspect figure. 'My work is in the field,' Sloan had told them. 'Not in yards of paper and statistics. You lot can stick to the figures and the symbols. I'll take the flesh and bone.' But now . . . He glanced again at Sloan. One had only to be in his company to feel a growing alarm. He was like a cauldron on the simmer—one did not get too close. He smiled at his own imagery. Or like a boiler with a dangerous head of steam. He saw his face momentarily in the windshield, its widening smile.

'You find something funny in me?' Sloan asked.

'No.'

'—Sitting there grinning and pulling your stupid nose.'

Bickerton felt his cheeks colour. The nose-stroking, an ingrained habit in which he stroked the nose between thumb and forefinger in a strong downward pull, was something he tried to control. It gave the nose a polished look and, in the end, would be certain to lengthen it. He was a serious man in his twenty-fifth year, new to the Territory. Everything about the face was sharp: the chin, the nose, the frontal bones, even the small grey teeth. He locked his fingers in his lap across the box of darts, watched the plain disconsolately. It was reddening toward the west and already the horizon dissolved into sky and the undulation of the western steppe was like a sea running out of the sun.

The dry-season motor road ran at right angles to the fence and Bickerton watched its red-brown curl appear on the plain. He could smell the dead antelope in the rear of the truck and he looked behind him to where the horns protruded from the gunny-sacking—a fork of crawling flies. It was one of four diseased impala which they had reached before the scavengers. He said nervously: 'I don't like touching it. I don't even like being in the truck with it.' Beneath the gunny was that odorous pustuled mouth.

'No,' Sloan said. 'But if it is anthrax we ought to know about it.'

The truck jolted and the flies lifted, formed into a garland. Bickerton watched it with loathing. 'I don't like it,' he said. 'I don't like it at all.'

'So you said.'

'Are you sure we should do this?'

'Why not? Don't you want to know what it is?'

'Yes. But——'

'Think of the charts,' Sloan said. 'The lovely coloured charts. You'll be able to do this one in green. The Anthrax Mortality Rate Among Impala. It'll look well with the one you did in red. You remember—The Incidence of Rinderpest in the Buffalo Population?'

Bickerton nodded. He was studying the flies and he had not heard the sarcasm in Sloan's voice. The garland descended like a flung ring over the horns: he saw it work between the lips of the sacking, down toward that suppurating face——

'There's one on your neck,' Sloan said.

Bickerton felt his hand begin the movement toward his neck. He restrained it, kept the fingers tightly locked. He said sourly: 'I doubt it.' Athumani grinned and he saw the details of the mouth, the dripping mauve tongue which seemed too large; like a chow-dog's, he thought. He turned his head and the stakes of the fence came slowly, out of its own hazed perspective. The fence followed the boundary of the Reserve from the lake to the base of the rift-wall of Staedtler's Gorge. The fence evoked strange fancies. There was a look of cruelty to its shadow; those cruciform shapes with the sharp points. Whenever he saw a high fence impaling the sky he thought of imprisoned men. He relaxed in the seat. Why should that be? Perhaps some atavistic knowledge of freedom lost in a past in which he had not lived? He allowed the thought to develop idly. The truck was pleasantly warm and he half-turned his head so that he looked across Sloan's face to the western steppe. The plain had levelled and there was only the green-red sea of hillocks, a few clumps of bird-fluttering thorn. He could not see the dry-season track and he sat upright, peered into the evening mists. 'It's not there,' he said.

'What?'

'The road. We've passed it.'

'That's right.'

'But we should've turned off.'

Sloan said nothing.

Bickerton held the big forearm. 'You should've turned.'

'Take your hand away,' Sloan said.

'All right. I was only——' Bickerton locked his fingers again.

'It's just that I can't bear being touched.'

'We should have turned.'

'We'll take a run up to the gorge.' The voice sharpened. 'We can drive back along the lovely concrete road.'

'We ought to get back.' The truck plunged and a wave of air

brought the odour of the impala. 'We ought to get that thing to the vet station.' The odour reached his stomach. 'It stinks.'

'Yes.'

'Really bad.'

'There's a clip on that notebook.'

'So?'

'Stick it on your nose.'

He heard Athumani chuckle. He wanted to hurt Sloan. He said: 'All roads lead to the gorge, don't they?'

'Do they?'

'For you they do.' He saw the beard move slightly as if the head had nodded in assent. He said sardonically: 'The Last Paradise. The Garden of Eden.' He smiled. 'It's not much of a paradise now, is it?'

'No.'

'You should see the subterranean power-house they're building. Huge . . .'

'Yes.'

'They say the generators will be the biggest in the world.'

'Yes.'

'And the turbine runners. Ten of them. They are so massive that they will be shipped only at intervals of six weeks.'

'Yes.'

'One hundred and thirty thousand horsepower from each of the generating sets.'

'Yes.'

'The cable-drums are already at Port of Kuru. They are four times the height of a man. And did you hear about the trees?'

'The trees?'

'The junipers. They are going to rip them from the walls of the valley.' He looked at Sloan but the face was expressionless. 'When the lake forms they will establish a fishing industry, stock it with fish. But African trees, with a few exceptions, don't rot under water. They petrify, turn into stone. And that means they can't leave them for fear of tearing the nets. Imagine it, they'll rip out those enormous ancient trees like so many saplings.' The truck moved faster and he knew that he was affecting Sloan; that the speed came from Sloan's agitation. 'They say they rip them out of the ground with the anchor-chains from great ships.' He looked again at Sloan and the sense of triumph immediately left him. He felt shame; as if, absurdly, he had hurt something meeker and gentler than himself. The words had come from some germ of vindictiveness which he had not known he possessed: he could not

retract them. He said weakly: 'That's what they'll do.' He watched the passage of the fence, began to count the stakes.

Sloan said: 'That expression, the Garden of Eden. What made you use it?'

Bickerton shrugged. 'Just a phrase. Why?'

Sloan did not reply. The truck gained speed and the fence turned toward the sunset and the palings came now in flickers of russet wood and wire and the shadows seemed to leap and fall under the wheels.

The fence ran down to the papyrus creeks at the mouth of the gorge and at its angle a notice-board had been set which signified that this was the boundary of the Mirembe Game Reserve. A station-wagon stood in the square-headed shadow of the board and three men in jeans and coloured shirts moved around the wagon. Sloan stopped the Land Rover near to the rear of the wagon, got out. Bickerton and Athumani followed. The gorge was dark-purple, the wadis full of secret shade. Sloan reached into the truck, cut the engine; at once he heard the rumble of sound from the dam site. He could not see the dam, only the darkening wall of the gorge and the shelf where the plain broke into scrub and, within the scrub, the concrete shapes of the hospital and the mission-school. The concrete was flushed pink with sunlight, the Cross of Lorraine two transverse scarlet incisions in the face of the concrete. The men turned and their shirts and flesh were vivid in the soft red light. One of them came forward; a young burly man with thick features and a small birthmark which sat on the cheek like a clinging leech. He held a wire noose in his hands which he pulled and closed in a deft and practised manner. He announced himself: 'Piaf.'

'You have some English?'

'Enough.'

Sloan pointed to the notice-board. 'You understand that?'

'Yes.'

'Give me that snare.'

The face changed.

'I said give me that snare.'

Piaf asked: 'You are . . . ?'

'A game warden.' Sloan held out his hand. 'The snare, please.'

Piaf gave it to him. The other two men had moved behind him.

Sloan asked: 'Alpe-Mounie?'

'Yes.'

'You know the rules about game. It has all been made very clear to you.' He went to the station-wagon, pulled open the rear doors.

A half-grown reedbuck lay on the floor. There were more of the wire nooses. Sloan examined the buck. The throat had been cut and the snare by which it had been trapped was still attached to the left hindleg. He lifted the leg. The hoof had been almost wrenched off by struggle. He dropped the leg. Then he pulled the buck and the snares from the wagon to the ground. The men stared silently. Bickerton began to stroke his nose in long nervous pulls. Sloan counted the snares. There were twenty-three. He told Athumani: 'Put them in the truck.'

Bickerton said: 'These men are not in the Reserve, you know.'

'No,' Piaf said. 'We are not in the Reserve.'

'Not in Reserve,' one of the men said.

'They are in a controlled area,' Sloan said.

Piaf frowned. 'A controlled area.'

Bickerton said: 'How can you expect them to make such distinctions?'

'Shut up and don't interfere,' Sloan said. He watched Athumani gather the snares, load them in the Land Rover.

'You will give a receipt?' Piaf suggested.

Sloan smiled. 'You'll get some bloody receipt.'

'We should have a receipt.'

'A receipt,' the other two men said in unison.

Sloan said to Piaf: 'Where have you laid the snares?'

Piaf shrugged, gestured vaguely to the area of the creeks. The face had become sullen and the birthmark was livid in the dying sunlight.

'Come with me,' Sloan told him. He walked slowly along the line of the fence. He heard their feet behind him. Thirty paces down in the direction of the creek the timber of the fence had been sawn away so that the opening, about six feet wide, would invite a passage. The ground on both sides of the opening had been set with snares, then lightly decked with grass. Sloan bent to them. The nooses were very close to the ground, sufficient only to ensnare a paw or a hoof. They were secured in the soil by short steel rivets. There was something foreign about them; in the materials, the construction and the laying of them.

'Jerat,' Piaf explained. He had regained his confidence. 'In Malaya the jerat.' He grinned arrogantly. 'Chincse catch pig and mouse-deer with jerat.' The grin widened and the birthmark crinkled like an overripe plum. 'Alpe-Mounie like plenty of fresh meat.'

Sloan stood. 'Plenty of fresh meat?'

'Yes.'

One of the men (he wore a shirt with butterfly patterns) rubbed his stomach as if the mention of meat had caused a pang of hunger.

Sloan said: 'Now take up the snares. Every one of them.'

Piaf scowled. 'You will steal them?'

'Confiscate.'

Piaf was silent. Sloan could see that he searched his mind for an insult which he could effectively translate. Piaf said: 'Then f—— you.'

The man in the butterfly shirt nodded in agreement. 'F—— English.'

Sloan said to Piaf: 'Are you going to take up the snares?'

'No.'

'Take up the snares.'

'You want them, you pick them up.'

'I will tell you once more. Take up the snares.'

'No.'

'Then I will make it easier for you.' Sloan knocked him down with the back of his hand. 'Now take up the snares.' He turned but the two men had not moved forward. The butterflies, great yellow and magenta shapes, seemed to flutter in the half-light. He heard a small explosion in the gorge: a flock of birds rose immediately into the air like the black debris of it. Piaf got to his feet, grinning. He was one of those who grin in moments of pain or stress. The flesh over the cheekbone had split under the blow and a rivulet of blood began the journey to the jaw. Sloan watched it move in a slow zig-zag as if it sought a way through the terrain of the cheek. Piaf continued to grin; the eyes assessed Sloan's size and height.

Sloan said: 'Pick up the snares.'

Piaf shook his head and Sloan knocked him down again.

Bickerton came forward, took Sloan's arm. 'Stop it, Sloan. This violence . . .'

Sloan shook off the arm. 'I told you not to touch me.'

'Let him go, Sloan. Athumani will fetch the snares.'

Piaf got up. The trickle of blood had gone round the birthmark, leaving it exposed like an island. It reached the corner of the mouth and the mouth ran suddenly red and it said: 'F—— English.' Sloan hit him and he fell to his knees, the face near to the snares.

'Stop it,' Bickerton said. 'Please stop it.' He hated and feared violence. 'I'll take them up myself.' He could feel his heart throbbing. 'Please, Sloan.'

'Don't interfere,' Sloan said. He saw Piaf's hand close on one of the snares, jerk it from the soil. The man whispered: 'I pick up the

snare.' He turned it so that the spike of the rivet was held to the front of him, got to his feet. Sloan saw the spike lunge at his stomach and he shifted and knocked Piaf to the ground again. Piaf began to retch glutinous dribbles of saliva and blood.

The man in the butterfly shirt said: 'We pick them up.' He seemed unaffected by the violence. Perhaps they are used to fights, Bickerton thought. The man and his companion gathered the snares, took them to the Land Rover, stowed them. Then they returned, lifted Piaf and put him in the driving-seat of the station-wagon. Sloan followed, stared into the wagon. Piaf wiped blood. He was crying from humiliation.

Sloan said: 'And get that fence repaired. You understand?'

'Yes.'

He rejoined Bickerton and Athumani.

'You hurt him,' Bickerton said. He felt sympathy for Piaf. 'Why not give them the reedbuck?'

'No.'

'They might as well have it.'

'No.' He heard the engine of the wagon. It started forward. They had not sealed the rear and the doors flapped and banged with the motion.

'We forgot something,' Bickerton said.

'What?'

'The anthrax. We should have told them.'

'We're not certain it's anthrax.'

'All the same, the camp should be warned.' A thought occurred to him. 'If we'd told them in the first place, shown them the impala, it would've saved all that——' he stroked his nose—'all that disgusting brawling.'

'It's turned,' Sloan said. He was watching the wagon. 'It's coming back.' The wagon completed its circle, gathered speed. They heard the doors beat in a succession of staccato bangs. He could see Piaf's intent face behind the windshield and the orb of the sun crossing and recrossing the glass like a broken globe of flame. For a moment he thought that Piaf was about to run them down but the wagon passed them, drove obliquely at the fence. He saw Piaf turn the wheel with great care so that the right bumper struck the shaft of the notice-board, snapped it neatly. The board fell, caught in the wire of the fence, danced briefly on the tension of the wire. The truck returned and Piaf's tear-laned, bloody face stared from the side window and the faces of the two men came to the left and right of it and all the faces gloated with triumph and the three mouths

shouted: 'F—— English.' Then it had gone and the red dust from the wheels drifted to their boots, to the carcass of the reedbuck.

'Children,' Bickerton said, in surprise. 'Just children.'

Sloan went to the notice-board, detached it from the wire. He could see the patterns of worm-holes in its splintered end. The board had been taken from store and, although Craven had been dead for over a year, it bore his subscribed name. By Order of the Game Dept., it said; Senior Game Warden, Laurence Craven. Sloan touched the black-painted letters of the name, feeling the outline of them where the thickness of the paint raised them above the wood of the board; as if it was Craven's flesh that he touched. His hand trembled suddenly and he said to Bickerton: 'They will put it back. I will make them put it back.'

He took the board and its broken shaft to the Land Rover, wedged it in the back. He heard Bickerton's voice say behind him: 'I wouldn't do that, Sloan.' The voice was anxious. 'They're a wild lot, they say. Like a lot of wild animals.'

Sloan smiled; but to Bickerton it seemed that the smile was the expression of an inner torment. The cauldron again, he thought: one could feel its heat. He shook his head uneasily.

'I'm used to wild animals,' Sloan said.

After Bickerton and Athumani had left for the concrete access-road Sloan took the path that would lead him through the paddock to Kleinert's mission-school. He carried the notice-board across his shoulder and the edges of the shaft had begun to bite the flesh. The plain and the creeks were already thick with darkness: he could see the sky above the dam luminous from the reflection of the arc-lamps. The brittle white light touched the pillar of the hospital; the lighted windows of the hospital and Kleinert's quarters at the flank of the school seemed to smoke with an orange fire against this blue-white light. He hesitated before the door that would take him to Jan and Mary Kleinert. They were within that orange glow, insulated from the dam in their little world of goodness and serenity. He listened but he could not hear their voices, only the hum of the dynamo. He could not bring his cut hand and the smell of violence to them and he turned, followed the path around the schoolhouse. A still figure, the figure of a woman, stood on the path and he stopped, stared through darkness, shifted the board from the right to the left shoulder.

Emma Kleinert's voice said: 'Who is that?'

Some perverseness kept him silent and she came toward him and

the face caught light from the windows and he saw her hair swing. She said uncertainly: 'Is that you, Alan?' She came nearer and he saw the pale face and the hollow of the throat above her dress. She stared and she said with decision: 'It's Harry Sloan.'

'Are you disappointed?'

'Not really.'

'Were you expecting him?'

She shook her head. 'But it could have been Alan.'

'Or someone else.'

She tossed her head and the hair swung again. 'Could be.'

He smiled. Where do they learn all this? he wondered; the gestures, the tilt of the chin, the parted lips, the words that seemed loaded with amorous meaning: perhaps it was part of some inherited ritual. He said: 'You're a proper little flirt, aren't you?' He saw her stare at the notice-board.

She said, with curiosity: 'What is that?'

'I have come to put the board up.'

'You have come to put the board up,' she repeated.

'Yes. It is a warning to the young men of the dam.'

'A warning?'

'A warning that there is a highly dangerous ginger piece here.' He set the board against the wall and Craven's name revealed itself in reflected light. The humour left him.

She bent forward, read the words aloud; slowly like a child hesitant before a difficult phrase. She pronounced the name softly; 'Laurence Craven.' Then: 'He was a nice man.'

'Yes.'

'What's going on, Harry?'

'Nothing.'

'Why are you carrying that board about—on your shoulder?'

'I always carry it like that.'

'Don't be silly.' She moved nearer to him. 'You're not really joking, are you?'

'No.'

'I can always tell with you, Harry. Something tears you up inside and you make silly jokes but underneath——'

'Yes?'

'Oh, I don't know.' She had not learned to express herself and words came without fluency. 'I can feel it,' she said. 'You're burning with anger.'

He pointed in the direction of the dam. 'They did it,' he told her. 'And now they are going to put it back.'

'Tonight?'
 'Yes.'
 'Do you know who did it?'
 'A man called Piaf.'
 'Are you sure he'll want to put it back?'
 He smiled.
 'They're a wild lot,' she said seriously.
 'That's what Bickerton said.'
 'Bickerton?'
 'The biologist.'
 'Oh, him.'
 'Don't you like him?'
 'He's not bad.'
 'No good for a flirtation?'
 'No.'
 'He'd be glad of a hot bit of stuff like you, Ginger.'
 'I don't flirt with everyone, you know.'
 'Nearly everyone.'
 She smiled. The game had begun again. 'I haven't flirted with you, Harry.'
 'No.'
 'And the spots have gone.' She turned her face from side to side. Like a woman exhibiting a new hat, he thought. 'Don't you like me?'
 'I'm too old for you.'
 'Oh, I don't know . . .'
 'The lieutenant is better for you.'
 'He has another pip. Did you hear?'
 'No.'
 'He says we have to celebrate.'
 'Celebrate? What kind of celebration?'
 'In Mababe. He wants me to go to Mababe with him.'
 'All young men are—urgent.'
 'That's a good word.'
 'Will you go to Mababe?'
 'I might.'
 He shrugged. 'If you want to be an Army tart . . .'
 'You sound like Miss Smythe.'
 'Who is Miss Smythe?'
 'Nurse Smythe. She disapproves.'
 'Why?'
 'Oh, I don't know. Because I'm young . . .'

He heard the accent of arrogance. Because I'm young . . . Ellis, he remembered, had found a similar arrogance in Pitt. The words formed, rising in the mind like the wood-smoke from the fire in that nightbound valley. ' . . . You exhibit your youth, wear it like a kind of gay and glorious flower. You flaunt it . . . ' He watched her face, its firm flesh and the clear line of the jaw. The breath would be sweet. Why was youth so unbearably pathetic? Because one knew the flower must decay? He could find no resentment, only pity. He said gently: 'You are right to be proud. But you won't always have it . . . '

She said: 'I like you when you're kind.'

He touched the board. 'I have to go now.'

'Won't you see Daddy?'

'No.'

'He'd enjoy seeing you.'

'No.'

'Walk round the paddock with me.'

'I told you. I'm too old for you.'

'Just a walk.'

'No.'

'I promise not to flirt.'

He stared at her. 'Promise? You can't help yourself.'

She smiled and he saw that the smile was of infinite age. 'Afraid?'

He shook his head. There was a feeling that they were caught in an echo. 'Won't you be on duty?'

'At nine. We have some patients.'

'Illness?'

'Accident. Some men fell down a shaft. Two were admitted.'

'They are in there now?'

'Yes.'

'Two real men?'

'Yes.'

'Shouldn't you get back? After all, such an opportunity. And you have their clothes. They cannot escape.'

'I don't fancy them.'

'Oh, come . . . '

'Yes, really. They are such toughs.' She searched for the words that were constantly eluding her. 'They lie in bed and they look like . . . like blocks of brown granite.'

'You'd better be careful.' He studied her. 'I like your hair like that.'

'Don't you start.'

'Does someone else like it?'

'Yes. Old Brooke.'

'The doctor?'

She smiled. 'The Chief Medical Officer.'

'That's quite a title.'

'He's an old queer.'

'An old queer . . .'

'Yes. Always touching my hair. It fascinates him.'

'I don't blame him.' He reached out, lifted it. It was heavy and he could feel the vigour of it. 'Why shouldn't he touch it?'

'Oh, I don't know. It seems—funny.'

He allowed the tress of hair to fall. 'I ought to go.'

She held his arm. 'Once round the paddock.'

'All right.'

The paddock was dark, not yet touched with the clarity which would come with the brightening night. Odours of mist and burned vegetation thickened the throat. He could see the scythed ground running in small black tussocks to where the scrub grew to the wire fence. He could not see the fence, only the deeper texture of blackness which would be the scrub. He stared into these tones of blackness, across the wadis and the marsh, across to the gorge. Where did Haggard lie? It could not be far. The river had risen twice since the burial, had surged in spate across whatever cairn of rock and pebble Quinn had built for him. It would be there, above the quiescent river; some patch hallowed by nothing but sun and rain and river-water and the shadows of birds. Haggard's matter was already a part of the gorge, pressed downward by the weight of the river, divided and washed, perhaps, to the flood-plain in a million grains of sand. But it was a good graveyard; the oldest graveyard in the world. Haggard. Thomas Eveleigh Haggard. The name would not leave him. It was inscribed on his own substance ineradicably and he carried it about with him like a memorial of guilt.

'You went quite cold,' she said.

'Cold?'

'Yes. I felt you shiver. As if somebody had walked over your grave.'

'Don't talk about graves.'

'What were you thinking?'

'Nothing.'

The hand tightened on his arm. 'Tell me.'

He stopped. They were at the boundary and they could hear crickets in the underbrush. 'Why do women always want to dig into

the private areas of a man's mind?' he asked irritably. 'You are not really interested.' Like a child dissecting a mechanical toy, he thought; to discard when the curiosity is satisfied.

She said, with sudden insight: 'You wouldn't give much to a woman, would you?'

'What do women want?'

She considered it. 'More than a little money, more than a tumble on a bed.'

'Can't you forget about beds?'

She giggled and the sound seemed to strip her of wisdom, restore her to childhood. 'I'm not really a tart,' she said.

'No?'

'If you want to see some tarts you should go up to the dam.'

The path was roped and he had walked with one hand loose on the upper rope, feeling its corrugations run against the palm. 'What are these ropes?' he asked.

'A guide. For the blind children.'

'The Suru?'

'Yes.'

'Many?'

'It varies. Brooke says they come for the food.'

'Do you mind that?'

'No. So long as they come.'

They heard a door open, a woman's deep voice. The door shut.

'That's Miss Smythe.'

'She has a fine voice.'

'She's an old cow.'

'No, seriously. It was a wonderful voice.' The sound had come unexpectedly like a phrase of melody heard in an empty street.

Emma Kleinert giggled again. 'You should see her. There is nothing very wonderful . . .' She mimicked Miss Smythe's contralto: 'We don't drop hairpins in the dispensary, Nurse Kleinert.'

'Is that what you do?'

She shrugged.

'I'm sorry for Miss Smythe.'

She swung her hair with the characteristic jerk of the head. It touched his arm with the soft animal feel of a fleece. She said significantly: 'That's the cause of it.'

'What?'

'My hair. Miss Smythe hates it. She's jealous. I've seen her stare at it with those big goldfish eyes of hers. She says I have to cut it off. But I won't. I won't, I won't . . .'

'All right, you won't. But don't tell me. Tell Miss Smythe.'

'Do you know why she wants me to cut it off?'

'You told me.'

'It's because she's bald.' She searched in her private well of spite for a satisfactory image. 'Like a vulture.'

'Poor Miss Smythe. A bald vulture with goldfish eyes.'

'It's true.'

'I don't believe it. Not with a voice like that.'

'Can you imagine what she did today?'

'Something bad?'

'Yes. She put an empty cocoa-tin in the dispensary and stuck a big white label on it with the words: For Hair-Combings.' The voice was resentful. 'What difference can a few hairs make?'

'I'd like to meet Miss Smythe.'

'Do you think I'm a slut, Harry?'

'All women are sluts. Except Miss Smythe.'

'She's probably peeping through the window now.'

'At us?'

'Yes.' She touched the rope. 'Those funny little blind kids.' The resentment had gone and the voice held the timbre of loving kindness. 'There's something about piccaninnies, isn't there?'

'Yes. Something . . .'

'And when they're blind . . .' The face had softened. He saw her hands go to her breasts, lift them slightly as if to relieve the pain of her compassion.

She said: 'You walked up the path through the darkness with your hand on the rope.'

'Did I?'

'You know you did. Like one of the children—as if you didn't see very clearly.'

He nodded. He could hear the rumble of sound in the gorge, the beat-beat-beat of a piledriver. There was a time, he remembered, when a man could stand motionless in the brush and hear only the sibilance of wind and cataracts; look to where the arc-lamps shone now in blind white channels and find only the garnet-point of a solitary fire to prick the night. He listened and the beat of the piston was like the pulse of some living force which had possessed, consumed the gorge. One of the lamps twisted to the sky like a search-light, the light shedding so that the scrub came from darkness in evil tones of verdigris. He saw her face, the eyes dark with knowledge and the swell of the cheek faintly green. Then the lamp dipped and her face was formless, the fleece of hair jet-black against her shoul-

ders and the pale cloth of her dress. He felt heavy with the weight of presentiment.

'I see clearly,' he said. 'As clearly as I'll ever see.'

Now he was on the tar road that led to the Suswa Dam, the notice-board bitten in the muscle of his shoulder and the sky lightening behind him. Ahead, the sky would remain black against the arcs, against the horizon of fitful yellow light that defined the camp. Now, he could lose the pretence of humour, slip easily with a kind of relief into the bitterness which had spread like an erosion of the soul. He could feel it there: this aridity spreading outward into the new shocked arcas like a stain on a white garment. Every second of every day saw an advance in destruction. The machines were omnipotent; they scarified the flesh of the gorge, exposed its innards, moved like the jaws of scavengers into the bowels of antiquity. From the crags, from the lips of rock and the highest of the summit ridges, he could measure this destruction. It was measurable in terms of pain and shock. There, high in the wall of the gorge where the surface was torn into a flat red abrasion, had been the caves in which the first man crouched beleaguered by the night. There, where the floor was pulverised, had been the great boulder shaped like a wizened face on whose chin he had often sat tranquil above the river. There, where the end of the suspension footbridge sank into a deep black wound, had been the sheet of rock-face vitrified by lightning in the haze of past and so perfect in its glass-like surface that it had shone like a mirror to cast a current of lemon light in the river. And there, where the coffer dam grew like a crescent sign of evil, had been . . . He shook his head as if in rejection of an act so monstrous that the mind could not grasp its every facet. The gorge changed contour in the glare of the sun; hid itself in the material of darkness like a woman hiding a disfigurement behind a scarf.

He had not descended from the crags or taken any of the paths to the dam or the settlements. He had not brought himself to walk through the bloom of dust and the clamour of machines and into this pit of effort where men in coloured shirts and helmets wilfully disinherited themselves. Distance softened; and perhaps he had been afraid to see the details of the wound. Beyond the gorge, in the valley, they were preparing another kind of death; the death of trees, the extinguishing of living light in the blackness of water.

He shifted the board. There was a moon somewhere in the

cumulus and a filtering of grey light: his shadow marched ahead, grotesque with the board across its shoulder. The road was empty, lined now with warehouses. He could see the rise of land and the hills above the gorge and lights in the hills and, nearer, the incomplete shapes of buildings; the steel shuttering which would receive the concrete was bared like teeth in the face of the hillside.

The company office lay through the legs of the crane; a low shed with a corrugated asbestos roof sited between the plant depot and a guarded pillbox which he guessed to contain explosive. He had looked up to the cabin of the crane, up the superstructure to the limb of steel and cable which swung against the night. He had watched its leisurely parade of power, the limb stark and purposive and the tracery of steel illusively delicate at that height like a working in filigree. It fed the skips, disgorging its burdens of fresh concrete with a kind of deliberation; like a god dispensing provender, he thought. There was no strain, no sense of effort. Its power was limitless and he had stood beneath it, near to its vibrant heart, and he had touched his own soft sinew with a kindling of disquiet. There was a feeling that the crane presided; that all power, motive and decision flowed therefrom and that the men in that bowl of heat strove only at its direction. The noise of the site seemed to converge, as if its separate waves of sound had met suddenly beneath the crane. He wiped his face and neck: the noise filled him, filled him to surfeit, broke again on the flesh in new globules of sweat and he moved from the shadow of the crane into electric glare. Above, he saw the lights of the Mababe 'plane, very high. They would be looking down, casually from the rims of glasses and ice against the lips, following the pewter sheen of the river to the crater of blue-white light.

The company office was a place of partitions and unshaded bulbs and meters with staring dials. Mosquitoes from the river circled the bulbs. There were two clerks. One of them listened without comprehension to three negroes with flat Congolese faces who spoke alternately in slow phrases of Kiswahili. The other sat listlessly beneath a bulb, a copy of *Paris-Soir* in his hands. The newspaper was dark with grease as though it had been used to wrap food. The light from the bulb exposed the dirty scalp. It was very hot in the office, as if the bulbs increased its heat. 'Piaf,' Sloan said to the man. 'I want Piaf.' Someone shut the door, then opened it. The noise of the mixers seemed to leap through the office and the man held up a spotted hand in rejection. 'Piaf,' Sloan repeated.

The man nodded, blinked with apathy. He said faintly: 'You have French?'

'No.'

'One has a few English words.' The hand scratched in the head and a flake fell to the surface of *Paris-Soir*.

Sloan said, with distaste: 'I have not come for a conversation. I have come for Piaf.'

The man nodded again, went to a card-system and from thence to a sheaf of work-schedules. The finger travelled. 'Piaf,' he agreed. The finger pointed in the direction of the coffer, then to the clock on one of the meters. 'Eleven hours.' He held up both hands, then a thumb. 'Eleven.'

Sloan left, walked from the offices and past the HE dump. Piaf, he interpreted, would finish a shift at eleven o'clock. He looked at his watch; three minutes to eight. At eleven Piaf would need food, drink and sleep. The night was torrid, Piaf was young. It was reasonable to assume that, at eleven, Piaf would go for a drink.

At a quarter to eleven he came from one of the airless alleys into the thronged central area of the camp. This area was a square on which unmade roads converged. It was flanked on one side by marquees, on another by a bar and the stalls of vendors; and on the remaining sides by flimsy hardboard dwellings. It was this air of impermanence which stamped itself on the mind. Nothing had stability or weight. The shapes of the dwellings worried the eye. No man had wasted time or effort on angles and levels. The camp served the site: it was a projection of it and, when the rains came, portions of it would wash away like flotsam on the brown waves of the Suswa. Higher, in the hills on both shores of the river, the new town would rise, immune from flood.

He crossed the square. It had the feel, sound and smell of a market-place. Humanity moved in divergent streams under the night, met and intermingled. He carried the board with care, its square, lettered head dipped behind him like a rudder moving through a sea of robes, vests and naked chests. The faces came without detail, gourds of brown and purple flesh swinging in arches of tinted light. He stopped once to assess this quality of light. It was shed like a rainbow. The marquees bloomed with inner light and the canvas threw olive against the blue of the arcs against the red neon sign of Bar Chancre against the smoking orange lamps of the stalls: the air seemed thick with colour. The sounds of voice and music came in unlinked phrases on the deeper tone of the site, rhythms of

French and Negro patois, the beat and wail of a modern dance. He felt suddenly submerged, almost breathless, and he turned for the side of the square. A man stumbled against him and the face rose up out of the wake of anonymous faces, very close, the eyes rolling and the thick wide mouth opened. Like a fish come to the side of a bowl, he thought. The face belonged to a black cleric and it sat on strange retorted shoulders and a black jacket burned green in places by the sun. The man said something in a servile voice.

He reached the stalls, rested the board by setting its splintered end in the ground. Two British sergeants passed holding a small obscene effigy (two joined naked figures) which they manipulated with strings. Most of the stalls were vivid with merchandise; bales of cheap prints spilling from the orange lamps, the colours untrue in the rainbow light. He stepped across the flutter of a live fowl which had been tied by the legs and exposed for sale on the ground. The feathers were stuck with dust. A woman offered fruit and he stared at the globe arranged in pyramids like sensual still-lives. He bought a sliver of melon, ate it, gnawed it down to its rind and threw it into the brown darkness behind the stall. The sergeants returned, jerking at the effigy, the faces sullen, now, because it refused to copulate. He watched the scene. It was pulsatile with life: an arc-lamp swept it and it seemed to spread and quiver like a peacock's wing. Elsewhere, this interplay of milling life might have drawn him, taken him on its fervent stream. It had the animation, the heightened colour of a festival. But he had only to lift his eyes above the square and the arcs and the giant crane, drop in spirit from the gorge to the valley . . . It was unreal, unbelievable. This is the gorge, he had to tell himself: *this is actually Staedtler's Gorge*. A sound here, a year ago, would have brought you to your feet. And that sawn tree-bole where the Kuke is urinating: you see it? You can still see the claw-marks of a leopard. The sergeants passed again, gleeful, with effigies of such obscenity that they kept them hidden in their hands. He heard one say: 'I'll send this home to the old girl . . .' The woman offered melon and he shook his head, lifted the board. A hand touched his arm and the negro in the clerical collar whispered: 'I can get you young Somali virgin.'

'No.'

'She is truly a virgin. And clean.'

'No.'

'I can get you—anything. All the novelties.'

He saw the rapacity in the face. 'Are you really a pastor?'

The man showed his carious teeth in a grin. The breath came in a

wave of decay. 'Not really.' The fingers, noduled like a leper's, fingered the collar. 'But it creates confidence. Are you quite sure? If you do not care for virginity . . .'

Sloan brushed him aside. The breath had touched his nostrils like an emanation of evil. He walked up the boarded sidewalk that led to Bar Chancre and he heard the voice say distinctly, somewhere in the crowd: 'I can get you a boy . . .'

He stopped, stared up at the sign. It was bizarre, the letters fiery in the night like a warning. Bar Chancre. The air of unreality returned and he touched his brow in confusion. Bar Chancre: a neon sign in Staedtler's Gorge. Near to here Ellis and Vanrennan staggered from the mouth of the gorge into the flood-plain in an extremity of exhaustion. And down there, where the skips expectorated concrete like grey-white sputum, a man had passed to death on the breast of a flash-flood and there had been no one to hear his cry.

Bar Chancre. This great twisted vein of glass with red gas running in it like blood; it was a symbol, of course, something that Alpe-Mounic set up whenever the wilderness required a sneer or a gesture of defiance. They built their citadel of vice and excess in the glow of the sign, in the shadow of Goliath, brought up their machines like instruments of execution. Bar Chancre—the sick humour of the name. He felt his hand clench on the shaft of the board. It would be easy to hurl it into the sign, make his own trivial and unavailing gesture. A western symbol. But of what?

Down there, through the alleys where the Africans lived in hovels made of sacking, the ordure ran in open sewers to the river and the rats were fat and in the alleys human faces peered from foetid holes like rodents. He had followed the sewers to the river and he had stood by those pools of nausea where the filth of the camp had infiltrated. It all rocked disgustingly with the motion of the water; fish-heads, paper, cans, the milky gleam of condoms, even a soiled bandage with its tapes wavering on the current: there, where once he had cradled his hand in the water to bring it to his lips to taste its sweetness. There was an illusion that he stood on a dock waterfront, the crane and the tall machines like derricks on the sky, the refuse like the discharge from the bowels of ships.

The illusion died in a wave of sound from the diesels, the gorge revealing itself in moonglow. He had turned from the river, walked through the alleys and the smells of wood-smoke, food and urinated earth. There were lights in some of the rodent-holes, pockets of heat which touched the flesh like steam.

He came from the alleys to the hardboard houses. They were

precarious, seeming to shiver with movement; like the houses he'd built as a child out of playing-cards. The entrances were uncovered but one of them was draped with beads like a Moorish curtain and the body of a stripped fish lay in front, its scales scattered like wet coins. He had passed into the square, looking backward at them. These were lairs, not habitations.

Bar Chancre reached immediately to the senses in glare and an acid odour like the dregs of wine. The odour was pervasive. It lay in the concrete walls, in the sawdust that lay congealed on spilled drinks, in the bodies of men driven too far in heat. There were many people. A juke-box played and four Africans stamped seriously, corrupting the European tempo to an older rhythm. There were no chairs or tables, only this bareness of electric glare and tobacco-smoke in which men drank standing, the helmets set back off the brows and the flesh of the brows cut deep from the pressure. There was a zinc bar and shelves with an impressive array of bottles, a barman with a yellow Arabic face. The smoke under the bulbs was whipped by flies. The building had settled at the short end of the L and a vertical fracture cut the concrete, dripped a picric stain as if the wound had sloughed. A few French travel-posters decorated the walls and a native fetish made of rushes and a goat's foot had been pinned incongruously beneath the Mont-Blanc massif. Faces came from the Place des Anges awash with redness from the neon sign and the groups of men shifted constantly from this ingress so that Bar Chancre seemed perpetually unstill. The noise was a component of the glare and the smoke, a pressure on the mind. Sloan went to the bar. The juke-box stopped and there was a slight hiatus of sound in which the heads turned and the eyes went in curiosity to the notice-board. He set it by the bar, the splintered end uppermost. The malarial face leered. 'British?'

'How did you know?'

The man said rudely: 'Only the British exhibit the knees.' Then: 'We have everything here. Beer, of course. Ice. Even English Scotch.'

'Beer.'

The man holed the can expertly, poured the beer. 'I am certain we have seen each other.' The juke-box started. 'It was at Bar Mostagenem in Oran.'

'I have never been to Oran.'

The man retained the glass in his hot damp hand. 'I am sure it was Bar Mostagenem.'

'Could I have the beer?'

The glass was unpleasantly warm from the grip of the hand; like a contact with the man's feverish blood. He set it down. He was watching the entrance. Two negresses with paper umbrellas and mouths cracked with carmine lipstick came in. He paid and the man dropped ice into the beer as if the ice had been a condition of prompt payment and the voice said: 'I am an Algerian.' Heat seemed to layer beneath the ceiling of smoke. He saw a moth with wings like tree-bark crawl into the concrete fracture. The beer was tepid. A negroid face came through the neon wash of light, stared into the bar: the clerical collar went suddenly pink. Sloan turned away. The servile voice spoke again in the mind: '... if you do not care for virginity ...' The word brought pictures; white flesh and the swing of hair coming to the senses like the wave of a wand of incense, the scent of vegetation in the night. Of course one cared for virginity: in women, in forests, in gorges, in valleys: in all things despoilable. 'My name is Raoul,' the Algerian said. Sloan nodded. He heard the diesels. Why do we destroy the things we prize? he asked himself. He drank beer, staring down into the opaque jags of the ice. The pink palms of the Africans had begun to flap to the music. Her hair, black in the night, had swung against his arm and he had felt desire burn like a filament in his loins, engorge him: he had swallowed and it seemed that the throat contracted and he had wanted to seize the red hair close to its roots, turn her face. Emma Kleinert was virgin. One always knew virginity. It was there, in the feel, the smell, the look of her; like a new book that has never been opened. The flirtations were without significance. They did not touch her, left no scars; little approaches down avenues of titillation toward something she wanted yet feared. One knew that. He drained the beer. Twenty: twenty years of age. Christ! to be twenty again. She was born about the time he left for Burma. He could actually remember her at Mary Kleinert's breast, that tiny freckled breast which had dried within a day or two. And when he returned she had been a child, freckled like her parents, pale with heat. Then, for some reason, the memory leapt across the intervening years and he could not recall her and the image came into focus again only when she went to Port of Kuru for the nursing. The hair was beautiful but, then, the cheeks and shoulders were marred by angry spots and she would not look you in the eye for shame of them. Poor little Ginger; you could guess the pain of it. The ice had melted in the glass and he poured its residue into the sawdust, set the glass on the zinc.

'Yet again?' the barman asked.

'Please.'

The man gestured to the notice-board. 'It is a fine board.'

'Yes.'

'It is a regret that it is broken.'

'Yes.'

The man poured, hesitated with a tong of ice. Sloan paid and the yellow face nodded and ice plunged into the beer. The man ventured: 'But I cannot read the message. It is upside down.'

'The message?' He watched the entrance.

'One has a great respect for religion.'

Sloan turned. The board was becoming ludicrous. 'It is not a religious message. It is——' He reversed the board so that the lettering faced the base of the counter. The noise in the bar lulled momentarily and he heard the whine of the generator. The Algerian stared in disbelief. He drank the beer and a hand touched his shoulder and he turned, expecting the face of the fake cleric, the fawning voice. But the hand was Quinn's. He stood there, the powerful legs implanted in a drift of sawdust. He was accompanied by a large man with a bloated body, misshapen with age, and pale, sun-faded eyes which blinked in the glare of the bar.

Sloan said, with pleasure: 'It's Davey Leese.'

Leese nodded. He was a very heavy man, no longer agile; all the movements were slow. Even the lips and the tongue and the jaw worked slowly on the mechanics of speech; like a man who has been solitary for too long a time. The corduroys were secured with a wide leather belt which, loose, accented the convexity of the belly.

'You're off your beat, Davey,' Sloan said.

Leese nodded again. Words were used like coins of value.

Quinn asked: 'You going to buy us a drink, Sloan?'

Sloan stared.

'You owe me a drink, don't you?'

'Do I?'

Quinn smiled. He said significantly: 'You owe me more than a drink, Sloan.'

'Beer?'

'It'll do.'

Leese removed his slouch hat. The scalp was red and hairless, the skin stretched so tightly across it that the bones in the vault of the skull were defined.

Sloan asked: 'Still on the rotgut, Davey?'

Leese grunted and Sloan beckoned the Algerian. A group of men

had begun to sing with the juke-box. More negresses entered, a mulatto girl in a soiled white dress and European shoes the slender heels of which had been worn down to stumps. She had a beautiful tawny skin.

'That's Lusi,' Quinn said. 'Angolese.' He drank some of the beer, went over to the girl. Sloan saw them talk, the eyes of the mulatto gleam with cupidity. Quinn returned. 'I've fixed it,' he told Leese. Leese nodded, blinked vacantly at the naked bulbs.

'Davey's come in for a drink and a girl,' Quinn explained.

'You on the pimp now?'

Quinn flushed. 'I fixed it for a friend.' Then: 'You're still bloody rude, ain't you?' The mouth grinned. 'You want me to fix you a girl?'

'No.'

Quinn finished his beer, belched. 'Of course not. A Simon-Pure like you don't need women. Fresh air, a dip in cold water, a nice clean johnny. That's you, Sloan.'

Sloan watched him. He was half-drunk; or elated for some reason. The black-haired fist held the glass, rotated it so that the ice swirled. Quinn put down the glass, flexed the fingers. Sloan saw the details of them; the small calluses, the nicotine stains, the dust under the broad nails. This was the hand that drew Haggard from the pool, the hand that buried the sodden body. It had touched Haggard, arranged him in the bed of that shallow grave, covered him with soil and rock. He drank and Haggard's thin ascetic face wavered in the froth: the face shattered and reformed on the surface of the breaking bubbles in miniatures of accusation. He grimaced and the Algerian said anxiously: 'The beer is not good?'

'It's sour.'

'We have everything.' The yellow hand produced a cocktail-slide, indicated its length of coded plastic. 'I can make you anything.'

'Gin. English gin.'

'Only gin?' The voice was disappointed.

'Yes.'

Quinn paid, stared at the notice-board. 'That yours, Sloan?'

'Yes.' He saw the mulatto open her mouth, accept a morello from a man in the red helmet of the explosives division. Everything had come to Staedtler's Gorge; even whores sucking cocktail cherries. 'It's a message,' he told Quinn.

Quinn frowned.

'A religious message. Or so the barman says.'

Leese left them for the mulatto.

'You're a queer sod,' Quinn said. He reversed the board, read the lettering by twisting his head. 'One of these boys bust it?'

'Yes.'

'On purpose?'

'Yes.'

'And you aim to make him stick it back?'

'That's it.'

'You're round the bend.'

They watched Leese leave the bar with the mulatto. The hairless head shone in the neon like a ripe apple. Quinn laughed. 'Old Davey's round the bend all right.'

The barman came over, stared at Sloan. He said stubbornly: 'I am convinced it was at Bar Mostagenem.'

Sloan saw the red scalp and the tawny skin dip into shadow, come again into rainbow light, merge with people.

'It's the shack with the beads,' Quinn said.

'Shack?'

'Where Lusi takes you.'

Sloan looked at his watch. Piaf's shift had finished. He asked Quinn: 'Are you working for Davey?'

Quinn nodded.

'Do you need that kind of money?'

'I need any kind of money.'

Sloan saw the big, collapsed body move in its tired way through the night of the square. Even the movements with Lusi would be slow and silent. He heard Quinn say: 'Poor old Davey. Still chasing the jumbos.' Leese was an Australian who had once cut sugar-cane in Queensland. The hands were wealed. Something had been left in those estates of fire. He was a man burned out, the sun in the brain like a cautery. Little *cafards* of obsession had grown there and he had gone to the Cameroon in search of an elephant's graveyard. Reports filtered to the Territory of a big sun-crazed man and a tracker from the Chad journeying endlessly through plains and forests on the trail of old and dying bulls. The reports ceased and it was presumed that Leese had died or abandoned the quest; but, then, Leese came out of the forests of the central rivers and plateaux and into the Territory, still drawn by the myth through the hazes of sun and his own motivation, as solitary and ageing as the bulls he followed. Leese was failing, Sloan knew; consumed by sun and the worm in his brain. Leese would wander until the end, a man in search of his own graveyard. 'I told him,' Quinn was saying, the voice hollow in the glass from which he drank. 'I told him it was all

rot, that nobody believed it. I've found plenty of jumbo-bones, I said: they can't choose a place to die any more than you and me. And even if it's true, I said; even if you do find an old bull that's on his jack, what are the odds? You don't know how old he is. Maybe he's a hundred, a hundred and fifty. But he could still outlive you. And apart from that what are his chances of dying of old age? I said. Nobody's going to let him live it out in peace. He's going to get older and slower—just like you, Davey. He's got to carry them big yellow teeth around in the face of a whole army of poachers and hunters and hungry blacks . . .' Quinn grinned. 'But it didn't make no difference. He just blinked and told me to be ready tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Davey's boy is sitting it out on an old bull down in the valley. Davey wants me to look him over, estimate his age.'

'What will you do? Count the wrinkles in his trunk like a tree?'

Quinn stared. 'You joke—but it's worse than spit in the face.'

Sloan watched the entrance.

'Sloan,' Quinn said.

'What?'

'I was going to ask——'

'I guessed you were.'

'My licence——'

'What about it?'

'Freeland says he'll reinstate it if the officer making the original charge supports the application.'

Sloan nodded. 'That's the usual drill.'

'Well?'

'No go.'

'Eighteen months. Isn't that long enough for you?'

A man came to the notice-board, examined it, shrugged and walked away. The bar had filled. Most of the men had come directly from the dam. They were unwashed, the faces and forearms streaked where sweat had run through dust. A man wiped grit from the corners of the eyes with a beer-wet handkerchief. 'I never seen men work like it,' Quinn said. 'Out there in that terrible heat. If they leave a tool in the sun they can't pick it up. And the funny thing is the blacks go down quicker than the whites. You'd think they'd be used to sun by now, wouldn't you?' He spoke quickly, with a suggestion of strain; as if he could reach Sloan through the interchange of words. Sloan knew that the small eyes searched him for signs of yielding. He did not look at Quinn, only at the entrance

through which Piaf must come. Quinn's voice rode thickly above the noise of the bar . . . 'I don't really understand it. But the idea is to get the coffers up before the wet comes, divert the river and then build the main dam on the exposed bed . . .' The voice died and Sloan heard the Algerian say wistfully: 'We have everything here . . .' Quinn said urgently: 'I want my licence, Sloan. Don't a man's living mean anything to you at all? Do I have to go on paying? Sloan . . .'

Sloan said nothing. Perhaps Piaf would not come. Perhaps Piaf needed women more than drink, lay naked in one of the timber and hardboard houses.

'I can give you lots of info, Sloan. I've got my ear to the ground. I could tell you things . . .'

But Piaf would come. A shift in this humid night—Bar Chancré must surely be irresistible. Quinn's words lay vaguely in his mind. 'What things?'

'Things about—poaching.'

'The trade?'

'Yes.'

'I'm listening.'

Quinn shook his head. 'Not so fast.'

'I don't make deals.'

'You made a deal with Channa.'

'That was Meckiff's deal.'

'You had the benefit of it.'

'I told you. No go.'

'I'll give you names—names you can follow up.'

'Keep them.'

'Names, Sloan . . .'

'Send them to Meckiff.'

'Don't you *want* names?'

I have a name, he could have said: the name of Paul Hassan. I have held it since that day in the gloom of Channa's lorry. I feel it writhe—like the sunworm in Leese's brain. Hassan. Hassan; the name imprisoned, locked away by the promise made to Kleinert. He could still see the pastor's intent face, the enormous anxiety growing there with his own narrative of events. And then the voice . . . 'And now you want to rush off to Port of Kuru, find this man Hassan. What will you do? Knock him about? Tear him to pieces? Flush his name out of your system with some shocking act of violence? I don't trust you, Harry: not on the road you're following. You are too raw, too obsessed. What good will it do to beat up

Hassan? You'd be delivering yourself to Meckiff—he'd never lose such an opportunity.' The small freckled hand had held his arm. 'Mary and I, we love you, Harry. We want what is good for you. Promise me you won't go to Port of Kuru, that you'll forget Hassan. Make it a test of self-control, of discipline . . .' The face wrinkled comically. 'Isn't that what you need? A test of discipline?' He had looked into Kleinert's eyes and he had known that his answer was important: if he could not give this to them, this small abnegation . . . 'All right,' he said. 'I promise. I promise not to seek Hassan.' The eyes had moistened in gratitude. 'Good. Do no more. I'll put his name about in the right places. Let someone else catch him, charge him.' Later, he heard of the watching of Hassan, of the descent on the premises in Government Road. But there was no illicit ivory, nothing to support a charge. Ram Channa, of course, had warned him.

Quinn said spitefully: 'Okay, I'll give you a name. One you won't like. I'll give it to you for free and for gratis. I'll even enjoy it . . .' He drank hurriedly and a trickle of beer ran down the chin. 'Mac-laren. Johnny Mac-laren—your pal. Johnny and Kerr. Their hands ain't so lily-white.' The fingers rubbed beer into the bristles of the chin. 'Yes, that gives you a shock, don't it? But it's not just heresay, Sloan. I been up to that farm. You never saw such a shambles. They're in queer-street all right, all right. Debts up to their eyes. Mac-laren told me they need a thousand pounds for fertiliser alone, another three or four hundred for water bore-holes. And the same old get-rich-quick schemes—castor-oil for jet engines is the newest one. But I tell you this, Sloan—the info's good. They been poaching ivory for a twelve-month.'

Sloan did not reply.

'Did you hear me, Sloan?'

He set down his glass. A face had moved into the neon wash; a face with a birth-mark on the cheek.

Piaf, it was evident, had gone direct from the site to the dormitories. The face was already ashine with sweat; but it was clean. He would smell of soap. The hair curled with wetness. He wore a heliotrope shirt with the creases of newness, a gold crucifix at the throat. He was accompanied by the man in the butterfly shirt and two mulatto girls with high-boned Ethiopian faces and breasts which stood free within their cotton dresses. Sloan watched the daub of heliotrope move through groups of people to the bar. Piaf had not seen him.

'Is that him?' Quinn asked. 'The one in the purple shirt?'

'Yes.'

'Take it quiet, Sloan. He's only a boy.'

He heard Piaf's voice, the giggle of the mulattos, the note of persuasion in the barman's voice. 'Old enough,' he said. 'Old enough to saw my fence and smash my boards.'

They could not see Piaf but, then, a quartet of men left the zinc and the shirt and the wet black hair came into view. The profile leaned and the Algerian listened. The cheek was contused; a red lip of broken flesh curved on the bone.

'He's been in a party already,' Quinn said. He stared at Sloan. 'Did *you* do that?'

'Yes.'

'You bashed him?'

'Yes.'

'And now you're going to bash him again?'

'Not if he puts the board back.'

'Let *me* speak to him, Sloan. We don't want no trouble.'

'There won't be trouble if he puts the board back.'

'But he won't, will he? Not with a couple of tittups with him. He won't lose face.'

Sloan lifted the board. 'Have you a truck, Quinn?'

'Yes.'

'Where is it?'

'Back of the crane.'

'Good. You can drive us down to the fence.' He went over to Piaf, pricked him in the buttocks with the splintered end of the shaft. Piaf turned and the face lost its animation. The butterfly shirt moved aside with the two mulattos. Sloan allowed the board to pivot in his hand so that it stood upright. The Algerian read it with interest. Sloan saw disappointment in the febrile eyes. 'It's a *kind* of religious message,' he said. Then, to Piaf: 'You are going to take the board down to the boundary of the Reserve and fix it in its proper place.'

Piaf smiled.

'Take the board, Piaf.'

Piaf smiled again, shook his head.

'I'll repeat it,' Sloan said. 'You are going to take the board down to the fence and fix it.'

'Now?'

'Now.'

The head shook and the wet black curls fell across the temples.

Piaf put his hand on the arm of one of the girls, fondled the flesh. 'We are *en promenade*.'

'I have a truck and I will take you down to the fence.'

'Oh, no.'

Sloan saw the light of bravado in the eyes. Bar Chancre was suddenly quiet and men and women moved away and he heard the generator clearly, even the tap of insects on the bulbs. Piaf smiled at the mulattos, inflated his chest. The moth with the tree-bark wings came out of the fracture, flew upward to the source of light. 'Take the board,' Sloan said.

Piaf did not move. The Algerian began to wash glasses nervously and the glass rang on the zinc, on the quietness.

Sloan said patiently: 'You have only to replace the board and there will be no trouble.'

Piaf shrugged. The smile was fixed like a grimace. 'Tomorrow—perhaps.'

'Not tomorrow. Now.'

Piaf fingered the crucifix, then the birth-mark, pinching it cautiously between thumb and index-finger. Like a man about to remove a leech, Sloan thought. He could smell the soap on Piaf's flesh.

'Tomorrow,' Piaf said.

Sloan propped the board against the bar so that it stood close to Piaf's elbow. One of the mulattos stared at it with incurious eyes, went to the right of Piaf, dipped in the handbag and began to arrange cosmetics on the zinc. Sloan saw the tongue wet the lips, the spike of rouge retrace them delicately. He tapped the board. 'You will take the board and follow me.' He pushed it and it slid on the edge of the zinc to Piaf's arm. Piaf pushed it back to upright, grinned at the girls and the groups in the bar. They were staring, the glasses suspended. The chest swelled and Sloan knew he would not surrender. The two British sergeants came in; they were flushed from heat and drink. The beret fell from the hand of one of them and he retrieved it with exaggerated care, began to beat sawdust from it so that the slapping sounds rode on the stillness of the bar. Piaf looked at the board, at the mulattos, at the arrayed cosmetics. Then he took the spike of lipstick from the girl's coffee hand and wrote in red capitals across the surface of the board: F— ENGLISH. The obscenity reached across Craven's name and Sloan stared at the defacement. Craven's pain-grey face seemed to recoil. He hit Piaf and the Frenchman collapsed on his buttocks.

He reached down, lifted Piaf from the armpits. 'That's something

else you have to do,' he said. 'Now you have to clean it.' Piaf kneed him in the groin and he hit Piaf's face and he saw the cut open and lengthen on the cheek. The knee came again but he met it with a downward blow of his fist and Piaf gasped. He felt the pain flood into his genitals. There was an impulse to lean, to bear down on the intensifying pain. Piaf's face blurred behind these mists of pain and he saw the fingers encircle the neck of a wine-bottle, the rapid flick of the wrist to break the bottle on the zinc and, then, the white-green jag of glass seeming to thrust from out the heliotrope shirt; he felt the wind of it across his face and the glass arc again across his eyes, the tremor of fear and the tiny pain like the prick of a needle as the glass faintly touched the bridge of his nose. He hit Piaf in the body and Piaf fell and he stamped on the wrist so that the fingers opened from the neck of glass. The cosmetics had fallen with the sweep of Piaf's arm and he stared at them, then at the board and Craven's disfigured name and he bent, took the lipstick from the sawdust and spread its redness over Piaf's nose. Then he took the kohl and rubbed its blue-green substance on the cheeks. Then he took the face-powder and broke the box on Piaf's head and beat it down into the face and the powder came in scented clouds to his nostrils and when he stood Piaf remained crying on the floor in the wine-stained sawdust and the face was comic and grotesque like a clown's and, then, he heard the giggle of the mulattos and the laughter start in ripples through the bar, growing, and the laughter seeming to buffet Piaf's powdered head, the laughter immersing this humbled figure in its new heliotrope shirt and he felt empty, devoid of triumph, and he could hear nothing but the laughter and the derision and Piaf's sobs.

Later, he watched Piaf fix the board in its place at the fence. Men had followed in trucks from the camp and the trucks formed a half-circle and Piaf worked in the glare of the headlamps. There was no laughter, no derision; only silence and the back crouching over the shaft and the hole in which it would rest and the painted face turning sometimes into the channels of light. The board was short now, erect in a place where few would read it, the surface already peeling from sun: it seemed a poor exchange for a man's dignity. The beer and the gin had gone sour in his belly and he stared across the headlamps to the distant arcs of the site and the moon-pale sky, then to Quinn's still face. Piaf stood by the board like a child awaiting permission to move and the men were silent behind the headlamps.

A calm had descended on the camp when he returned; as if the machines rested in the hours before dawn. Even the neon sign was a grey glimmer of glass. He left Quinn, walked through the alleys and down to the river. The scars of the gorge revealed themselves and the air was acrid with dust. There was a scent of decay. They had opened the gorge like an old tomb. It was defiled. He followed the shore of the river to the site, under the suspension footbridge, watching those eviscerated hill-walls turn toward him. The shores were stagnant with refuse. Nothing was clean or pure; nothing remained to touch the spirit. He felt something brush him like the edge of a fouled garment; imbue him with a desire to be at one with the gorge's soiling. Take the hand of the leper, he told himself, lick its sores. He returned to the alleys, emerged in the Place des Anges. The fish still lay in front of the beaded curtain but it had been trampled and the ground was bloodied with gut. He parted the curtain, entered the playing-card house. It smelled of soil and the loins of the woman. Leese lay sleeping in a corner with an open fly and the hands folded on the balloon curve of the stomach. He bent over him and he saw that the face twitched into little masks of alertness; even in sleep the man followed great animals through yellow mists of heat. Lusi, the mulatto, watched him from a sleeping-mat, the eyes black and fatalistic as if she had known he would come. He went over to her, knelt beside her. 'It will be three English pounds,' she told him. He nodded, took the sheet from her body. Words that he had not known he remembered came unbidden to the mind. He touched the face: I am black but comely. He touched the nipples: thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins. He placed his hand upon her navel, feeling its whorl against the palm: thy belly is like an heap of wheat. Leese grunted, began to breathe stertorously in his humid corner. He heard a drum in the African encampment and its beats seemed to enter and throb in his own bloodstream and the mulatto smiled and the thigh moved against him and when he bent to her the breath was musky like the scent of apples.

3

TWO DAYS AFTER THE affair in Bar Chancre Freeland sent him across the eastern escarpment to a village in the bracken zones where,

it was reported, three children had died from baboon attacks. He and Athumani had been received in silence. There was no movement in the village, no laughter. He sensed their fear and he stood watching them, the faces touched with medallions of early sunlight, knowing that he could not reach them, that he had stepped into some submerged juju world in which he had no place. There was no sign of baboon around the village. The oppressiveness lay on the village like the shadows of palms and he knew that some other agency had caused the deaths. He left them; to these shadows which were cast as from a mirror of darkness. He decided, on impulse, to follow the rise of the escarpment to the Maclarens' farm and, by noonday, he saw the fences behind the spears of sansevieria, the shapes of outhouses.

Like the village the farm reflected an immediate disquiet. Look at the fences, Vanrennan had told him once; you can always tell by the fences. They were broken, breached in places. He walked around the outhouses. The timber was eroded by white-ant. There was a smell of fungus (a smell which he associated thereafter with defeat). From the furthest of the outhouses he could see the north area of the estate, the white flowers of pyrethrum. The pyrethrum fields were preserved; but to their east were great areas of ploughed land browned with couch-grass. A few gangs of native hoe-labour picked dejectedly. He went back through the outhouses, the scent of ant-eaten wood coming like pollen to the nostrils. He pushed the door of one of the outhouses and the hinge parted from the timber. A tractor stood jacked, its wheels and metal red with old mud. There were ill-kept implements on the walls, scarves of spider-web. He passed the farmhouse and a Sukuma boy stared without interest from the veranda. On the southern flank of the estate he saw the fields of arabica which had been planted at too low an altitude: he searched for the glow of coffee-cherries but the bushes had not endured the heat, had been abandoned to weed.

He followed the fence to the rear of the farmhouse. There were vegetable gardens, a large barn and a smaller barn on stilts. From the back of the smaller barn he could look down the slope of the escarpment to the cereals and he went down to the fringe of the wheat and saw the blight of aphids, the cut patches where stem-rust had begun. Above the wheat gardens on the steeper slopes there had been an attempt at terracing but this had collapsed in the rains and the rains had tiered the slope in landslips of weeded mounds. The farm had the aura of desertion: an insect-place: a place where a snake might come and go and leave its trail in untrodden dust: a place, he

thought, where one could dream in sunpools and watch the bush reclaim from the hand of man.

He returned to the house. There was no sound or movement. Even the Sukuma had retreated to some place of apathy. Wistaria vined the veranda and its blue racemes gave a warmth, an illusion of well-being. But, further, he saw scrubs of prickly mimosa and the coarse yellow flesh of sodom-apple where the orchards had been.

He went back to the larger of the barns, entered. There were shafts of sunlight, the smells of grain and wormy timber, a loft of fodder from which hay hung in dried cascades. He crossed the floor and the hay brushed his face. The walls were stacked with produce for transport to the market at Mirembé. A few sacks of lime and phosphate lay by the window-aperture. One of the lime-sacks had spilled and his boots disturbed the drifts and the sun-shafts turned white in the upflung cloud of lime. He searched the barn, peering behind the produce and the bales and the coils of chain-link fencing which had never been used. Nothing was concealed and he stood in the doorway, his hand toying with the bolt of the door. Then he heard the hum of flies and he looked upward to the loft and he remembered the flies which had whipped in greed over the head of Bickerton's impala and he climbed the ladder and parted the hay and the flies rose and hovered and he saw the tusks, the roots still soft and yellow with tissue. There were three pairs. Perhaps, in the depth of hay, there were more. He descended the ladder, turned. Johnny and Kerr Maclaren stood motionless in the doorway, black against sun and the sun catching the two red crowns of hair. The hair darkened when they entered the barn, enlivened again like rekindled flames as they crossed the sun-shafts.

Kerr Maclaren said: 'Long time, Harry.' He was thin, very grey around the ears. He used a stick and Sloan saw that the leg had dragged through the lime-white dust of the floor. The stick pointed to the loft and Kerr Maclaren smiled. 'I see you've found the loot.'

'Yes.'

'What are you going to do?'

'You know what I have to do.'

'The cop-shop?'

'Something like that.'

'Ah, come off it, Harry,' Johnny Maclaren said nervously. 'We're all pals here . . .'

'Are we?'

Kerr Maclaren began to trace patterns in the lime with the ferrule

of the stick. He said, without looking up: 'No, of course we're not. We couldn't possibly be friends now, could we?'

'No.'

'You have your duty.'

'Yes.'

'A man's duty comes first.' The face lifted and Sloan saw that it was grey, etiolated by sickness. 'A man's duty,' he repeated. The voice was bitter.

'You don't look well,' Sloan said. He felt the barrier between them. He pointed to the stick. 'The leg . . . ?'

'Not so good.' Kerr Maclaren smiled again; that slight twisting of the lips which was like a reaction to pain. 'Some of us had a good war. Some didn't.'

Sloan nodded. The war, of course; always the war: as if every defect of the Maclarens, every personal failure in its aftermath could be related directly to it. He said abruptly: 'I'm sorry about your leg. But it hasn't stopped you poaching, has it?'

'A few pounds of ivory . . .'

'It's more than a few pounds—and you know it.'

The mouth twisted. 'Who sent you here?'

'I'll ask the questions.'

'Come in the house, Harry,' Johnny Maclaren said. 'Come and have a drink. We'll talk about it. A beer and a chin—like old times.'

Sloan nodded again. Old times: the phrases were predictable. He said: 'The old times are getting distant. And we are not in Burma. We are in a barn with a quantity of illicit ivory which requires explanation.'

Maclaren laughed and the thick red hair fell across the brows. 'I don't think we have any drink anyway. We're bust.' He spread his hands. 'Flat bloody bust.'

'It's true,' Kerr Maclaren said. 'We've had a bad time. What with the drought and the markets . . .'

Sloan saw the eyes retreat. 'You've changed,' he said.

'I'm getting older.'

'No. I don't mean that. You used to be—gay.'

'Gay?' Maclaren tapped his boot with the stick. 'With a leg like this? I get a laugh out of a leg like this—'

'I said I'm sorry about the leg. Now forget it.'

'Forget it? *Can* we forget it?'

'I am tired of the leg,' Sloan said. He felt his resolve weaken. He had loved them as boys, loved them in Burma. He said: 'I haven't forgotten . . .'

Kerr Maclaren said: 'It was wrong to remind you.'

Sloan went to the aperture, stared into distance. 'The farm looks bad.'

'Yes. Bad.'

'A real dog's breakfast,' Johnny Maclaren admitted.

Sloan said, without turning: 'Other people get by, make a living . . .' He heard Maclaren behind him. 'How long have you been at it?'

'The ivory?'

'Yes.'

Maclaren was silent. Then: 'This is the first time.'

'You're lying.'

He heard Kerr Maclaren tap impatiently with the stick. The dispirited voice said: 'You shouldn't try to trap us. If you have information—'

'Yes,' Sloan said. He turned. They stood in the sun shaft from the aperture, the heads red and unruly. They were like two anxious youths. Why did I come? he asked himself: why did I have to climb the ladder? They are boys; the tusks like forbidden sweetmeats found in a schoolboy's locker. He said: 'Why worry? They don't hang you for it.'

'No,' Kerr Maclaren said. 'But we're after a loan. And we won't get it on the strength of a poaching charge—'

'It'd cook us,' Johnny Maclaren said.

He watched their faces, the lips ready to smile in relief if he relented. He shook his head and the lips drooped into sullenness. 'I can't help you,' he said uneasily. 'You'll have to tell me everything—where you got it, who is receiving it. Everything.'

Kerr Maclaren shook his head. 'No names.'

Sloan shrugged.

'All we need is time,' Johnny Maclaren told him. 'Time and a loan. There's quick money to be made. We're cutting out all this grass and cereal rotation. It don't pay.' The eyes continued to plead. 'Cash crops is the thing. Quick cash crops. You can gross fifty pound an acre on potatoes. And they say there'll be money in castor-oil.' He smiled at Sloan, nodded his head as if to emphasise its immense potential. 'Castor-oil . . .'

'You better get that ivory in my truck,' Sloan said.

He reversed the Land Rover to the door of the barn and Johnny Maclaren and two Sukumas brought ivory from the loft, placed it on the ground. There were seven pairs and they were yellow in the

sun, pitted, dried grass sticking to the roots and already the flies forming excited disks and the whirr of sound seeming to accent the stillness of the farm. Kerr Maclaren stood a little apart, the thin body on the stick and the right shoulder high so that the leg should be relieved of contact with the ground. He looked fragile. Fragile like Haggard, Sloan thought: the same imprint of pain on the face, the same hint of accusation, even a withering leg to touch the mind. He stared from the tusks to Kerr Maclaren, to the champ of Athumani's jaws on black tobacco, then again to Maclaren and the shadow which, sharp from the vertical sun, took the stick and the shoulder and the hanging leg and stamped them on the earth in this posture of crippling. He said: 'I'm sorry about your leg. Truly sorry.' The words ran confusedly, rebounded to him. I have said that before, those precise words. When? To whom? To Haggard, of course. Haggard had lain on the stretcher and he had moved so that the fingers no longer clutched his ankle and he had looked down at Haggard's fear and the reflection of his own guilt and he had said: 'I'm sorry about your leg. Truly sorry.' And Haggard had said: 'You don't know the way, do you? You need the scouts because you don't know the way to the Forest Station. That's the truth, isn't it?' And it had suddenly seemed inconceivable that he should turn from the trail of the poachers and he had answered: 'Yes.' The word had formed on his lips, become sound on that soft pink air almost without volition, bound him to the future. *But I knew the way.* I have to admit it to myself. *I knew the way.* The shadow moved and he waited for Kerr Maclaren to speak and there was a curious second in which it seemed there had been a shift in time and situation, that Haggard's voice would answer: 'You don't know the way, do you . . . ?' But Maclaren did not speak and the body bent further on the stick like something thin curling in the heat of the sun and it was Johnny Maclaren who touched his arm and said: 'Give him a chance, Harry. Look at him, the poor bastard. You owe him something, don't you?' The hand tightened. 'I'm pleading with you . . . ' Now it had shifted again . . . those words . . . I have heard them before . . . someone else standing in sunlight . . . a thick voice. It was Quinn's, of course. Quinn. The morning of the cheetah-skin when Quinn had followed from the thicket . . . 'I'm pleading with you, Sloan . . . ' Johnny Maclaren said: 'You owe *me* something, don't you? You remember, Harry . . . ?' For Christ's sake, everything shifting now, images tumbling in the mind like coloured cards, the memory leaping the years between to that day of half-forgotten peril. 'You remember, Harry . . . ?'

Behind the burning tamarind he could see the façade of the Oranje Hotel. Everything wavered tipsily in the heat-waves. Burned paper had begun to fall on the road surface. A leaf from an account book settled on the shoulder of his uniform, its Chinese characters glowing white on the blackness. He brushed it off, began to walk down to the quayside. Somewhere beyond the square the mob was screaming. The sound had ferocity. He walked faster, aware of the weight of his helmet and the band hard against his forehead. A fez floated in a lake of petrol. He crossed the lake and the spirit saturated his boots and socks. He warned himself: be careful; if you touch fire you will burn like the tamarind. Glass fell on the pavement and he stepped to the crown of the road. Above him a curtain flared spectacularly from the window of a one-storey house. He turned the corner and the sky was bizarre with fire. A sugar-mill burned with a blue light and a cone of smoke climbed into the sun; he could smell the scent of molasses in its thickness. Fear had entered him. He had lost the patrol and he had no weapons. The mob bayed and he began to run—beneath the carapace of smoke toward the quays. A man with wild eyes lurched into him. The man said: 'It is no good. They have cut us off. It is no good.' Then, stupidly: 'My name is Elberfeld.'

He shook him off. The body of a British sergeant lay in one of the pools of petrol. The mob flowed across the road-junction and Elberfeld began to run toward the Oranje. He wheeled into the cover of a Chinese shop. Glass-fragments bit the soles of his boots, the stench of petrol was in his nostrils. Outside his fear he was conscious of the deserted shop and a mess of gutted fish in an enamel bowl and the sphere of an ancient sunfish hanging from the rafters. He moved and the glass grated. Nausea invaded him. He closed his eyes, head pressed against the cracked plate of the shop-front. Something exploded in the square and he heard the mob scream and the note of Stens. That would be the Maclarens' patrol. He began to choke on the pungency of the burning molasses and he opened his eyes, turned his face to the distant quay. The frame of a crane rippled in the heat. Above it, where the sky was free of the envelopment of smoke, a solitary aircraft moved across his vision. He listened again to the fury in the square. The Stens had ceased to fire. He could hear only the scream of asiatic voices, the rifle-fire like the sound of Chinese crackers that you heard on feast-days, the noise of breaking windows, the menace and the hatred concentrated in the centre of the frightened town.

He left the doorway. Anger had supplanted his fear and he walked back to the body of the sergeant, turned it with his foot. Petrol washed iridescently against the movement. He went toward the square. The street was empty. The tumult that lay beyond it reached out for him with its contagion of hysteria, its communication of hate so that, momentarily, he too wanted

to shout and sway with the mob, feel their passion dry in the throat. Then the moment passed. He moved again into cover. An ox with a flapping dewlap crossed the street; he could see the foam on the mouth and a red division in its hide. Behind him the quay erupted into sudden flame and the heat came in waves to the nape of his neck. The ox crossed again, stopped. He heard the flop-flop of its dung. The road was blue, red and yellow in the reflection of the fires. He swallowed into his parched throat. He wanted a drink and he stepped into one of the empty shops. It had a few bales of cheap cloth and a dilapidated cash register and a parlour behind with a sink and a dripping tap. He went in, opened his mouth under the tap, allowed the water to trickle across his tongue. There was a mirror above the sink and he straightened, stared at his face—thin and smudged under the big helmet. 'Christ!' he said. 'Christ!' The violence in the town was suddenly horrifying; a reproach to them all. They have to perpetuate fear and hatred and violence, he thought. The years of Japanese occupation were not enough. Or too much. Rebellion against the futility of it arose within him. He said to his god: If there is any hatred in me it is for violence—senseless, futile violence. He turned from the tap. Outside in the street he saw the running forms of the two Maclarens and several troopers and he shouted but they did not hear and when he went back into the flickering street they had gone to the flank of the hotel. More charred paper was falling.

He reached the flank of the Oranje, now incongruous in its striped awnings. The smoke from the burned molasses drifted. There were many British aircraft in the sky. The man called Elberfeld sat listlessly by the ornamental fountain, flicking with his fingers in the stagnant water of the basin. He crossed the courtyard and the hotel insulated him against the clamour of the mob. The awnings, gay at a distance, now looked shabby and tattered. He climbed the veranda, felt its rottenness yield like sponge under his weight. The posts were clutched in convulsus. He walked through the stripped and ravaged lounges. The looters had left nothing of value. The walls were marked with fire and obscene drawings. Patterns of white sunlight striated the floors, filtered through the slats of shutters. One of the lounges had been converted into an orderly-room. It had a desk and some buckled filing-cabinets and a spilled waste-paper basket and the bodies of three Japanese officers. The officer lying on his back had dark-blue hair and smashed spectacles. There was a typewriter on the desk with a piece of coloured paper on the platen. He depressed a key and a Japanese symbol popped idiotically on to the paper. It was strange, he thought, that the typewriter had not been taken. Then he heard the sound—a sound that was unmistakable, the slight suction of bare feet on wooden boards. He heard it instinctively as if it had at once isolated itself from the noise in the square. He turned.

A youth stood in the doorway that communicated with another of the lounges. He had delirious eyes and unkempt hair and an olive, asiatic face. He carried a carbine and he was staring greedily at the typewriter. He watched the forearm muscles tighten like strings as they braced on the weight of the carbine and the face began to smile with hatred. He could see the marks behind him where the hot naked feet had touched the boards. Outside, the mob screamed and a bat flew up from the shutters. The carbine sighted on him and he knew that the youth was about to fire and the reaction to that day of violence immobilised him and he stared in resignation at the barrel and when the burst from Johnny Maclaren's Sten took the youth in the back it seemed that the impact was in his own shrinking flesh; the scream when the round from the jerked carbine smashed Kerr Maclaren's leg his own cry of pain. The noise of the mob obtruded again, restored them to a sense of danger. He heard their frenzy shouting: Freedom! Freedom! Freedom! The great illusion, he thought; the right to die like the Japanese officers and the youth, the right to hate.

Later, after darkness, they left the hotel. Kerr Maclaren came one-legged between two of the troopers. The Chinese shopkeepers picked miserably in the looted shops. The fires were bright on the night-sky. Someone had ignited the pools of petrol and the body of the British sergeant lay black and absurdly small in the road and you could not see that he had been a sergeant.

The next day he returned to the Oranje. The awnings had been ripped away during the night by looters. The Japanese officers still lay grotesque on the floor but the typewriter and the body of the youth had gone.

He said to Johnny Maclaren: 'I remember.' He felt the weight of indecision. The shadow moved, fell across the curve of one of the tusks, became misshapen. He did not look at their faces, only at the shadow and the tusks and the useless leg. It had been like this with Piaf: a notice-board for a man's pride. Or with Haggard: a few poachers for a man's life. The equation could repeat itself endlessly. Now it was the Maclarens. What was the exchange for the animals they had killed? He nodded and he saw his own shadow respond. The price was plainly marked; the end of something. One had to pay; even for the Sten in the Oranje. Perhaps it was right to pay, the payment predestined. He said softly: 'Yes. Of course I owe you.' He got into the truck, drove from the barn. He did not turn his head or look from the window when the truck wheeled but he saw them once in the driving-mirror and they were waving and the red heads moved in the sun like flames and he felt his eyes flood with tears.

Toward dusk he brought the truck along the boundary fence to where the papyrus creeks fringed the mouth of the gorge, stopped at its angle. Everything was suffused in crimson light and he could hear the pulse of the machines at the dam. The fence had not been repaired. The shaft of the notice-board remained secure but the board itself had been removed and a note pinned on the area of clean white wood where the board had been. The note was printed in English and it was addressed to the Custodian of the Animals, derisively, he decided, and it indicated that if he cared to present himself to the Camp-Master the board might be obtainable. It was signed Etienne Férol.

4

KLEINERT SAID: 'I HAD been cutting zinnias from the bed by the schoolhouse and when I heard the truck coming from the wadis I knew at once that it was Larry's. The sun was low and I could see his hair and beard fiery behind the windshield. He stopped when he saw me and I sensed that something was wrong. He had that awful air of tension. And he began to joke—a sign that I had learned to recognise. "You look lovely with flowers," he said. I put the zinnias on the bonnet of the truck where they began to curl on the hot metal. "Why are you going to the dam?" I asked him. "I am going for a girl, padre," he said. "A beautiful half-breed with a skin like coffee-cream. But she is expensive. I was hoping you would lend me three pounds from the mission funds." I looked at his unsmiling face and I saw the anger in his eyes and I said: "If I thought she would relieve you of this terrible pressure I would give you the three pounds—and regard it as a Christian act." I picked up the flowers because they were spoiling. He said seriously: "Did you hear about the notice-board?" I nodded and he said: "Well, they've taken it again and they have invited me to collect it."

'He gave me the note and I read it. "It reads like a challenge," I said. He smiled and I said: "This man Férol is no boy to be knocked about and mortified with rouge and powder. There are four hundred half-savage whites up there, twice as many Africans—and Ferol is their master. He dominates them. He rules them with the strength of his arm." I read the note again. It seemed ominous. "Don't go," I said. "Let *me* go. *I'll* get the board." He shook his head. I asked:

"Would Laurie Craven want you to brawl over a bit of painted wood?" And he said: "It's more than a bit of wood. It's the whole Reserve. If they win the board they will win it all—the trees, the grazing, the game. They will swallow it." I got into the truck, pressed myself between Harry and the scout. We drove up the road and, soon, we saw the crane swinging on the wide red sky. I held the zinnias in my lap but I did not realise this. I was so alarmed that when we left the truck at the company office I still clutched the flowers and I followed Harry through the camp to the crane—like a boy carrying a bouquet to a tryst.

Kleinert watched them. Mary Kleinert sat stiffly, darning with her freckled hands rapid on the needle, the straight back not touching but parallel with the upright of the chair. Pitt and Emma sat together and Kleinert saw that the hands met but had not clasped; as if, he thought, this faint intimacy were enough. He said abruptly: 'Do you ever give her flowers?'

'No.'

'A soldier would look silly carrying flowers,' Emma Kleinert said.

Kleinert nodded. In public, the young suffocated with propriety. And yet, alone, they gave too much to each other. I'm getting old, he decided: I don't understand them.

Mary Kleinert said, without looking from the sock: 'The crane . . .'

'Ah, yes. The crane . . .' The mind, he thought, stopped at Goliath—like a train at the buffer. There was nothing beyond it; nothing more powerful in that place of power. Goliath. The name lived now in that area of the mind he reserved for names of foreboding: satanic names. But Goliath was easily the worst. He stared at the indigo night beyond the window. He could cope with Satan. There were rituals and invocations, exorcisms; the name was no longer evocative of fear. And even cats were called Satan. But no one had ever called a cat Goliath. Goliath was the crane of cranes, the god under whose shadow mighty rivers dried. He wiped his face. The night was humid. It is stupid, he thought, to allow such fantasies to possess me. Machines are machines—no more, no less: things inanimate, made by man with the materials and the intellect God supplied. If they have not built him properly, set his talons deep in the bedrock, he will topple and disappear in the river he seeks to master. He knew that his wife stared at him, that the hands had ceased to move and that, if he turned, the darning-needle would be a still hair of light above the wool. The quiet voice reminded him: 'The crane, Jan . . .'

'We had been told that Férol was in the vicinity of the crane but we passed beneath it and then around the buildings straddled by its legs but he was not there. I stared upward. Perhaps we had misunderstood. Perhaps Férol *drove* the crane, sat up there in its great steel heart . . . That would be fitting, would it not?' He sensed their perplexity, turned from the window, feeling a zephyr of air against his neck. Careful, he told himself: do not reveal this seed of evil which has begun to germinate within you. How could they understand this? That Férol, the master of men, should sit with his huge sun-black body in the vitals of the greatest of the machines, at one with it?

'We went back to the crane and there, in the shadow of a shed, we saw Férol at the head of a party of men. He must have been told of Harry's arrival because he carried what I took to be the notice-board under his arm. None of them moved. They stared across the space between the legs of Goliath, watching our approach. I had seen Férol before, usually at a distance or in a moving truck or high on the wall of the coffer. But never close like this. He seemed—monolithic, something hammered out of a thick pillar of dark stone; not fashioned to a figure of grace but broken crudely into a squat piece of statuary that would symbolise nothing but physical strength. He was short, shorter than any of his men; but very wide. He wore his customary blue bandanna tied low to the brows and knotted at the back of the neck under the helmet. There was something elemental about him—as if nature had sickened of the endless production of intellects and had thrown off a man who was splendidly and simply physical, who would take what he wanted by the power of his body—as man had done in the beginning. There was no expression on his dark Corsican face. He saw Harry and one felt that the deep eyes merely measured and assessed; in the way, perhaps, that they had measured the strength of mountains, rivers and gorges. I felt frightened and my mouth went dry. The group came forward to meet us in the centre and, suddenly, an arc-light dipped and bathed everything in bright blue glare and I saw that men were coming from all parts of the camp, that a great audience was collecting, on the roofs of sheds and dumps, swarming like tribes of monkeys up the legs of Goliath, even up to the super-structure itself. We were on a stage centred in an auditorium and the arc illuminated us like the glow of limelight. I had the feeling that we were to take part in some primitive ritual. Beyond the murmur of this throng of men I could hear the work at the dam. Nothing must stop and the limb of Goliath continued to move very high

across the arena, crossing and recrossing the faces and the baked earth in slow black chevrons of moving shadow.

'A man stood at Férol's side, young with a scarlet shirt and ruddy cheeks. His name, he said, was Zeffirelli and, since the Camp-Master spoke no English, he would speak for him. Monsieur Férol, he said formally, would not usually concern himself with the quarrels of his men. They could settle their own affairs and a defeat was a defeat. But one of his men, a Marcel Piaf, had been caused humility (he meant humiliation, of course) and that was a very different matter. Zeffirelli then turned to Férol and spoke rapidly in French, presumably translating what he had said to us. Férol nodded. I looked at him, at his swarthy idol's-face blue with bristle, at the thick neck and the hair (he was naked to the waist) that ran like a black mane from his throat and down the centre of his chest and into his belt; then at Harry, at the zinnias which I held stupidly in my hands. "These absurd flowers," I said: and Harry stared at them, smiled faintly and then, taking them from me, stuck their bunched stems into Férol's belt so that the heads of the flowers protruded above the buckle. They were deep red against his mahogany skin. No one laughed and Férol took them carefully from his belt, dropped them to the ground. I felt afraid again, terribly afraid. The flowers were a part of the same humiliation: the rouge and powder on Piaf's face, flowers in Férol's trousers. I sensed that Férol understood this. Harry, by his stupid act, had at once shifted the fight to a different, more bitter level where pride and dignity would now be involved.'

'Férol handed the notice-board to Zeffirelli. Then he removed the helmet and the blue bandanna. The hair was cropped very close and, because the scalp was never exposed to sun and the nap of hair was slightly grey, it made a strange pale contrast with his burned face. The forehead was divided into light and dark segments from the wearing of the bandanna. It gave a painted effect—the face was indeed that of an idol. He seemed invincible. One felt that if one fell against him it would hurt like an impact on stone. He took back the board from Zeffirelli, turned and walked slowly through the press of men. They parted with enormous respect. He went to the nearest of Goliath's legs. Two mattocks lay there, the shafts bound with adhesive tape where the grip would be. I remembered the words of André Schreiber. Everything ritualised, he'd told me; even the fighting done with mattocks under the crane. I looked at Harry. The crowd had retreated to leave a wide circle and I was alone there in the centre with him. He stripped off his shirt, gave it to me.

Then he pushed me gently and I went obediently to the side. No words of mine could stop it. I saw Férol wedge the notice-board at shoulder-level in the framework of the leg. Then he turned so that his back obscured the board, stared bleakly across the empty space. The message was plain. If you want the board, he might have said, you must defeat me. He bent, lifted the mattocks, weighed them in his short thick arms. Then he chose one, tossed the other through the air. I saw its steel head describe an ungainly arc, land near Harry's feet. I felt suddenly weak. It looked fearsome. The chisel-edge had made a deep cut in that iron-hard ground. Harry picked it up and a tremor ran through the watching men and at that moment the neon sign in the square threw a torch of red light into the sky, cast its glimmer on the steel of the mattocks, on the chests of these two huge men. The heat came down and the air was so humid you could taste its moisture. A pile-driver began in the gorge. It was like a drum beaten as a prelude to some barbaric ritual. It stopped and the final beat seemed to release something. Férol swung his mattock—leisurely and without force—as if he would test Harry's reaction, and Harry parried it and when metal struck metal a great shout went up and they began to circle, each grasping his mattock with the right hand.

'I could feel the pressure of people. I edged forward and the pressure came again. The ring would shrink. I looked behind me. There was a multitude of faces, indistinct but all marked with the same dark appetite. I smelled perfume. There were a few brightly-patterned dresses, even a livid mouth with a sweetmeat between the teeth. I looked back into the ring. They were close to each other, still circling, making little tentative movements with the mattocks, faster now, striking and parrying but still without intent to injure, learning the weight and balance of their mattocks. You could see that Férol was an expert. He had found the fulcrum and the mattock seemed now to twist and pivot on his hand, first the adze-edge uppermost, then the chisel-edge, the head of the weapon (I thought of it like that—it was no longer a tool) turning in arcs of light. He began to pass the shaft from hand to hand, still twirling the head. The pile-driver had begun again, beating somewhere beyond the diesel of the crane, and the vibrations seemed to come up through the earth and into the body so that the beats, now, were the pulsations of one's own rapid blood. I watched the tinge of flesh altering as they moved; sometimes red from the neon, black when the shadow of Goliath came, mauve from the mixing of the arcs and the neon. It had become mechanical, this circling, but suddenly

Férol reached under Harry's guard and flicked the chisel edge into the ribs.

'This was the first blood. It ran from the cut and down the cage of the ribs and into Harry's shorts. It stirred the onlookers. You could feel their immediate engagement. And when Férol spun the adze into the other side of Harry's chest and the blood leapt from the neat dark lips of the wound a charge of emotion that was at once recognisable within oneself spread like a ripple around the circumference of that murmuring ring.'

Kleinert stared at the poised needle. Its stillness was a sign of agitation. The generator had failed and the room was pale only from the brightening night, deep with shadow in its angles. 'We could have the pressure-lamp,' he offered. She shook her head. The needle began to ply. He heard it tap on the metal mushroom across which the wool was stretched. 'Or we could go out on the veranda.' The head shook again. The ugly face had softened in the half-light. Averted, it lay in shadow and he could see her thinning ginger hair parted in the centre and drawn behind the ears. He felt a sudden well of love for her. It came like that; something thick but formless coming to the throat and, then, her face wondrously beautiful for him. He wanted to stroke the hair, lift it and let its lifeless braids with their strands of white fall across the back of his hand. He wanted to say: 'For me you are beautiful . . .' Already, he knew, she had begun to look backward, backward and down into pools of memory made tranquil by distance; at the early days of the settlement, Harry Sloan's childhood, the birth of Emma. The present was nebulous, the future beyond her reach. This crisis of Harry Sloan's had thrust them apart, cleft the identity of being which they had grown over the years. Why should love do that? he asked himself; our love for Harry, for each other? We ought to find unity in a love like this—not separateness. Perhaps fear was the answer. Love could not exist without fear: the greater the love the greater the fear. And they were afraid for Harry, afraid to discuss it, afraid to look too deep into the reflections of this common fear, afraid to look outward and ahead because it would all be there, as predictable in its pattern as the weave of the wool across the mushroom in her hand. So he had to speak to her obliquely: speak to others across her bowed head as he was speaking now; and hope that something from the narrative would touch, condition her to what must come. He said to them guiltily: 'It is partly my fault. I helped to nourish this passion of his for wild places. Now he will fight, fight like a . . .' He shut his mouth. He had been about to say: fight like an animal for a hole in a tree—

stump, for a spring of water, for a patch of shade; because that is the only world it knows, the world it values. He said to Pitt and Emma, but speaking, really, to her bowed head: 'What will happen? What will happen when they turn on him to defend their own vision of the future?' The needle stilled. He said, with cruelty: 'Freeland tells me there is a small herd living in the Yuki thickets, which refuses to be evicted. Hervey of the elephant-control has done everything—firecrackers, continuous harassing, even Verey lights at the water-holes to stop them drinking. But they won't shift. So they are going to shoot them.' He sensed the pain which he had introduced into that beloved body. He wanted to press his cheek on the ginger head, feel its warmth. I can't put it plainer than that, he told himself desperately. The needle moved across the darn. 'Why don't you throw them away when they get so bad?' he said in exasperation. 'A great hole like that . . .'

Mary Kleinert said: 'The fight. They had cut his chest.'

'Yes,' Kleinert said. 'They had indeed: Férol fought for every man in Alpe-Mounie. The face was pitiless in that red-mauve light. He used the mattock with such expertise that it was like a projection of his body, moving in counterpoise to every shift of weight, the steel ends of adze and chisel shooting like the tongues of snakes. Harry, of course, had to learn through pain and injury. He had begun to strike at Férol but none of the thrusts got home—or if they did there was no mark on his thick dark hide. They continued to circle, the feet crushing the red petals of the zinnias and the steels ringing above the diesel of the crane like a blacksmith's anvil. Harry's chest was cut in a dozen places and, now, the wounds were indistinguishable, the chest a film of blood—'

'How could you stand there and watch it?' Emma Kleinert asked. 'How could you?'

'I don't know,' Kleinert said. 'There was something in the night, some maggot of savagery to nibble the brain . . . I don't know. It is only now becoming clear—as I describe it to you. Perhaps I did not see entirely with the eyes. I was involved—like every one of those men and women, a participant in a kind of orgy. The heat and the noise of the diesel seemed to lie on the head like a weight. A hot dry wind from the gorge blew straight into the brain, inflaming it. Once, when the helmet of a man bent across my vision I pushed him aside because I could not bear to lose a movement or a blow. I cannot explain this and I am ashamed of it. I did not pray. I did not say to God: Please don't let him come to harm. Please don't let him die, torn like the zinnias. There was no God, no love

no tomorrow, nothing beyond this cockpit of sweating flesh and coloured light.'

Kleinert turned again to the window. The arcs at the dam threw their electric glows on the sky. 'Listen,' he said. He held up a finger. 'You can hear the diesel of the crane. Listen . . .' The sound came to his imperfect hearing in a deep but muffled stutter. He probed his ear with the uplifted finger and there was a moment in which the crane throbbed with a loud and terrifying menace. He withdrew the finger-tip and the sound muted as if distance had suddenly intervened. He said: 'Férol had become contemptuous, flicking the mattock here and there, feinting and shifting within the tight little circle in which both men moved. He began to cut with the chisel-edge at Harry's hand and, soon, the knuckles and the fingers were like a red glove around the shaft. I saw him bring the other hand to his mattock to strengthen the grip but Férol cut at it with an insolent skill so that now both hands bled and the shaft shone wet. And it was then that Férol changed his tactics, crouched lower and began to chop at Harry's legs. This, then, was the way of the mattock-fight? Not to cleave a man's head or disembowel with one ferocious blow: but to cut and chop and mutilate until defeat came through weakness and the loss of blood.

'The ring of people pressed inward. I could feel their excitement, a sort of ecstasy which would mount until a man lay bled and motionless under the legs of the other. And Férol would give them this consummation. Life or death meant little to a man like this. Mastery was the only value, the only importance. Without it he was nothing. My fear returned. This was more than a fight. "He'll cut him to pieces," I whispered. The engine of the crane stopped and I heard the rasp of breath and the rustle of people and the scuff of boots in the ring and a little moaning noise which was Harry's pain escaping from his open mouth like the flow of something he could not control. The legs, now, were marked and bleeding and he moved slowly, without grace. Once, Férol's mattock caught the belt of a man on the fringe of the ring and, in the fractional second in which the head was arrested, Harry hit Férol high in the biceps, cutting a lump of flesh from the arm. But Férol's face was impassive and the mattock began to spin again, a nick here, a flick there, sometimes a heavy blow with the adze or a thrust from the centre of the head so solid you could hear its impact on bone and muscle. The crowd was almost silent. Perhaps when the end came its exultation would leap from it in some great orgasm of sound and it would shout Férol's victory to the rocks and caverns of the

gorge. But now there was no sound beyond a low murmur of passion. They were cast in stillness; a cigarette stuck to an underlip, a hand suspended, a trickle of sweat which had not been wiped, a gleam of disregarded spittle on a chin. And when I looked upward the same still faces stared down without pity from the legs of Goliath.

'Harry, I think, moved now against a tide of pain, slowly like a man whose limbs are in water. A phrase of jazz from Bar Chancre came on the wind and he stopped, cocking his head slightly as if he listened: the face was tired, the eyes deep with suffering. I felt sick. I whispered again: "He'll cut him to pieces." I heard a sour English voice say somewhere behind me: "Shut up, you Creepin' Jesus." The crane swung and the noise of its engine came down, seeming to stifle thought or protest and I saw Férol chop him carefully across the breast-bone, then again in the ribs. Harry did not move but then, quite suddenly, he reached out and wrenched the mattock from Férol's grasp and flung it together with his own to the edge of the circle. I heard them ring as they collided, a scream of frustration from the crowd. I felt its sudden pressure. It seemed it would break across that stamiped arena and exact from Harry some barbaric payment . . . But it was not like that. Férol held up his hand. The circle restored itself. The arc swept low, silvering the grizzle of hair. Then it lifted and the body became red-brown in the neon. You could see the muscles swell like bosses of hard red stone.'

Kleinert shook his head. He had not turned and he spoke from a face uplifted as if to some vague listener in the night-sky. "These men were of different clay. Both were large and heavy, endowed with great natural strength. But Harry's, one felt, had grown on light and air; always in affinity with movement, grace and beauty. Férol's derived from something deeper, more elemental: the strength, perhaps, of those veins of ironstone I used to see in the dark places of the koppies. You will understand me when I say I felt fear again. Férol had an air of—indestructibility. Harry hit him very hard with his fists in the body and then in the face and Férol went back a pace or two and the mouth opened but the blows lacked power.' Kleinert grimaced at the sky. 'I would as soon use my fist to hammer rock. And Harry's hands had been cut and bruised by the chisel of the mattock. I watched them circle. Now the scene had the quality of one of those English prints of the prizefight; the two heavy-torsoed men and the outstretched fists, the wary circling, the ring of intent faces and the deep faceless area of people behind it . . .'

The whine of the generator gathered and the lamp flared. Kleinert left the window, began to pace. The light struck down on the sparse pale-red hair of the scalp, revealing it like a tonsure. Emma Kleinert watched him; the declamatory hands, the monkeyish face and the putty nose which, to her, always seemed white and multiskinned in artificial light like the bulb of an onion. She leaned across Pitt, feeling her breast spread on his arm and his immediate response, switched off the light. Such ugliness was an affront to the eyes.

Kleinert said: 'Férol did not use the knuckles of his fists. He brought them down on the head or the shoulders or the upper arms as if each hand were a kind of club. I can see them now . . . ' he beat with his tiny freckled fists in an absurd and violent mime . . . 'those gnarls of bone . . . (beat, beat, beat) . . . dark and hard like wood that has been annealed in fire. I could feel those terrible blows within myself . . . (beat, beat, beat) . . . and all the time Harry's own maltreated fists striking into Férol's face and midriff. They circled. Neither man had fallen. Férol, now, was wet with Harry's blood. He looked fearsome in the wan light of the arc, as powerful and unconquerable as the crane that swung above him. I saw Harry's fist impact and the blood spatter from it and when the circling brought him close to me he flexed his fingers as if he would restore their feeling and I saw that he had lost the middle finger of his right hand. I knew now that he could not win, that every blow with that mutilated hand must cause him pain.

'Then, Férol stood quite still, dropped his hands; and when Harry hit him twice without effect I saw the face break from its cast of impassivity. The mouth smiled. He was the master; the master of Harry Sloan; the redeemer of a humiliation felt by every man of Alpe-Mounie. He went toward Harry, brushed aside a blow and seized him so that the fingers interlaced in the small of the back. Then he lifted and Harry's feet left the ground and in the moment of lifting and releasing I saw the arms constrict and I heard the cry of pain leave Harry's throat and flight upward into the steel of Goliath, a greater cry—of triumph—from the mass of faces.

'Férol, now, stood astride the width of Harry's body. He looked slowly around him, then above to the men clinging to the crane. The arc came down, focused on him. He was like an actor on a stage. The chest swelled. You could see that these moments of victory were, for him, the height of all experience. He stood there, silver in the direct light of the arc, posing, quite deliberately, so that this image of incontestable power should remain in the minds of all who saw him. There was a kind of purity in that silent statement of

physical force. For a moment I envied him. The achievements of the intellect were like pallid shadows beside this splendid strength.

'He went to the leg of Goliath, retrieved the notice-board, walked back to where Harry lay. He held up the board so that all should see it and again that great shout of triumph lifted. Then he broke the board across his knee, dropped the fragments on Harry's chest. A girl came from the crowd, kissed him on the neck. I saw her hand stroke the biceps of his right arm and the fingers run sensuously down its patina of blood and sweat.

'When I went to Harry, Férol and his men had already gone in the direction of Bar Chancré. I knelt beside him in the centre of shifting figures and the arc moved away and we were left in shadow. He lay without moving, his hands on his broken ribs and the blood from the stump of the severed finger pumping to the chest. He did not speak and the eyes stared up to the arm of the crane, seeming to watch its radial on the sky. I touched him. He was like an injured bird. I wanted to cry but there was no more emotion left within me. "Harry, boy," I whispered. "Harry..." Somewhere on the dam the crane lifted another of its enormous loads and I heard its diesel mount. We were ensheathed in noise and the noise came down with the heat and I picked up one of the zinnia petals. I did not know what to do. The petal was wet where it had been crushed and I pulled it apart, letting the minute pieces fall. Its sap was wet on my fingers.'

The generator had failed again and the alloy beds glimmered in the cast glow of the night and, away from the windows, the ward was dark and she could not even see the plaster pimples in the new rough surface of the walls. The two men of Alpe-Mounie had been discharged that afternoon and only the bed under the central window was occupied. He seemed too large for the bed, naked except for the broadfold bandages encircling the chest and the small islands of white gauze that covered the worst of the cuts, sitting upright because he found a greater comfort in so doing and the arms lying black and uniformly aligned on the white of the sheet. She thought that he slept but, then, she saw the eyes reflect a faint but perceptible light and the head turn so that the beard was a black and piratical spike on the bloom of the sky which was squared by the open window. She went to the bed and the beard turned to her.

'I'm on duty,' she told him.

'Is that good?'

'Would you rather have Miss Smythe?'

Sloan smiled.

'I believe you'd rather have Miss Smythe.'

'She has a lovely voice.'

'A lovely voice,' she said, with contempt.

'Yes, really. She was talking to me before you came. I closed my eyes and listened. Lovely.'

'That old bag . . .' She leaned, tugged where the linen ears of the pillow protruded from the sides of his head. She heard him gasp. 'Did that hurt you?'

'Yes.'

'Then shut up about Miss Smythe.'

'Only a voice, Ginger.'

'How do you feel?'

'About Miss Smythe?'

'About the injuries.'

'Bloody awful.'

'You haven't coughed any blood, have you?'

'No.'

'Or tasted any?'

'No. Would that be bad?'

'It might mean a punctured lung.'

He shook his head. 'No blood.'

'You had Brooke worried. He wanted to shift you to Mababe.'

'Why?'

She shrugged. '*Anything* complicated worries him.'

'Is there a complication?'

'Brooke doesn't know—and Miss Smythe doesn't think so.'

'I'll back Miss Smythe.'

'You should have heard him.' She mimicked the rich round voice: '“The sixth, seventh and eighth ribs, Nurse Kleinert. Here, you can feel the irregularities. The dangers arising from all fractures of the lower ribs are (a) an injury to the lung, and (b) an injury to the liver or spleen . . .”' She giggled. 'Then his face became suddenly anxious and he turned to Miss Smythe and he said in a terribly worried tone: “It couldn't be anything like that, could it?”'

'You're a proper bitch, aren't you?'

'That old Brooke . . .'

'He'll probably marry Miss Smythe.'

'You ought not to talk.'

'I don't mind.'

'Do the ribs hurt?'

'Like hell. When I breathe.'

'You shouldn't talk.'

'Or breathe. Should I stop breathing?'

'You're making those silly, bitter jokes again.'

'Miss Smythe says I must learn the Complete Breath when the ribs mend.'

'*She* would.'

'And sulphur tablets.'

'It sounds lovely.'

'Can you imagine it? Down by the river? The pair of us, sucking sulphur tablets and breathing deeply?'

'And Miss Smythe's beautiful voice.'

Sloan laughed and she saw his sudden pain. 'Christ!' he said. 'That hurt. That really hurt.'

'Don't talk, Harry.' She bent across him, smoothed the pillow.

'I'm glad you're on duty,' he said faintly.

'Just be quiet.'

'It means I'm safe. You can't get at me.'

'No?'

'It would be—unethical.'

She smiled.

'Oughtn't you to be doing things?'

'Like what?'

'Temperatures and things.'

'Lots of time.'

'Yes.'

She said, with deliberate archness: 'I could be very unethical.'

'I bet you could.'

'I could, really.' The game had begun.

He shook his head. 'Not with these ribs.'

'I'd be extremely careful.'

'What about Miss Smythe?'

'She's in the dispensary. I'd lock her in.'

'It's a good hospital, all right.'

'Extremely.'

'Don't keep saying extremely.'

'Why not?'

'I knew a policeman used to talk like that. Extremely this, extremely that.'

She sensed his coldness.

'What about these two?' He jerked his head at the empty beds. 'Did you give 'em the treatment?'

'The lot.'

'They like it?'

'They were delighted.'

'It's a real good hospital.'

She said: 'It's not really a hospital. And there's not much doing when the children go. Mainly falling objects.'

'Mainly what?'

'Falling objects. Most of the injuries at the dam are caused that way.'

'You better send Miss Smythe down.'

She watched him; the network of cuts on the flesh and the big raw swelling on the sternum and the bandaged right hand which they had not discussed. Beneath the sheet, on the legs, were more of the gauze islands. His body, she knew, must throb with pain. She smiled with compassion but the eyes had closed and he could not see, or assess, her smile. She felt his pain enter her, commingle with her own woman's-pain which, descending in dull spasms of ovulation, seemed to contract and squeeze at some immense reservoir of unfulfilment, squeeze from her that which she wanted desperately to retain. She touched the flesh of his shoulder and the eyes opened. For the first of these times there was no sense of uncleanness, no instinct for withdrawal; only this wanting to lie against him the pain in her womb against the pain of his own cut and throbbing body the pains divided only by the membranes and the skin and the pains, then, fusing so that they shared, shared. God! how I want him, love him, want him. She was weak, now, with this intensity of wanting. That would be another kind of sharing, the stream of their separate lives striving for oneness how wonderful that would be that kind of coming coming coming together so bright and flame-like it would be like a heat melting them the one into the other until there was one flesh one body one blood one single flux of blood pricked into a million cells of feeling. She saw his eyes move and, looking into them, their depth and in this depth a terrible unattainableness. She was empty, now, in the face of this awareness, taking from him the lesson of another's self, knowing by instinct and without process of reason that they could never lose their isolation, that the membranes would always retain within them the self, deny the final oneness, that the bloods could never intermingle; that the intermingling would be death. This she knew, at once and irrevocably, and the discovery, this sad and timeless knowledge, was like a burden of sorrow.

'What is it?' he asked.

She shook her head. It could not be communicated; a part perhaps, of her own unrelinquishable self. One wanted to give—and was prevented: that was the true pain of the wanting. She searched his eyes again. What had the fight really done to him? What irreplaceable thing had been taken? She had said to her father in that grey corridor with its odour of concrete: 'Will he be all right?' And Jan Kleinert said evasively: 'You're a nurse. You should know.' And she'd said, petulantly: 'That wasn't what I meant.' And Kleinert said, after a pause for deliberation: 'No man, least of all this man, can be defeated without injury to the mind.' She had stared at him, at the face floating small and pale in the bloom of moonlight that lay and effloresced on the concrete, trying to divine the meaning of this. What would happen? Was he a smaller man because a brute with a mattock had hacked him and cracked his ribs? Why should a man's pride and size be bound to that kind of primitive code? She said, coldly and without conviction: 'It's only a fight.' And then the platitude which came weakly to her lips because there was nothing else to say: 'We're not living in a jungle.' The remark had died in its own untruth. But he *is* living in a jungle, she told herself; nine parts of him in a jungle whose laws have never changed: only the remaining part concerned with gin and newspapers, people and routines. She had remembered in that moment of disquiet the times when he had taken her (a small girl, then) across the steppe to show her the herds, recalled the enormous respect in his voice when he had indicated the leaders, leaders who led from strength and undefeat and the pure rule of might.

'You're miles away,' Sloan said.

'No, not miles.' I'm right inside you, she could have said: fumbling like a bad surgeon for the seat of the true, the significant injury; wanting to heal—but without the power. She looked from the window, at the night and the arcs of the dam reflecting upward in a nebula of light. She could hear its mutter; this sound of men toiling in the night to build their crescents of concrete against the coming of the rains and the power of the river; nearer, the chirp of tree-frogs, wind in the brush.

Miss Smythe came from the dispensary, the great bust materialising like a white linen sail from the pond of darkness beyond the ward. The contralto voice asked: 'Don't you need a lamp, Mr Sloan?'

'No. It's nice like this.'

'I'm sure it is.' The eyes stared at Emma Kleinert.

'And it would bring insects.'

'All right,' Miss Smythe agreed doubtfully. 'But you ought to have a net when you sleep.'

'Never use them.'

'We're very near the river.'

'I'm fine, Miss Smythe. Really.'

The round face nodded. 'We'll have to watch those wounds. In this heat . . .' She had brought an acrid smell of sulphur soap with her. She studied his chart. She said to Emma Kleinert, deeply: 'You have things to do, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'Then do them.'

'I have asked three times for a urinal,' Sloan said.

'Three times?'

'Yes. The pretty glass ones. But they all have flowers in.'

'It isn't true,' Emma Kleinert said. 'Just another of his stupid jokes.'

Miss Smythe asked: 'Does your side hurt?'

'Yes.'

The big white body bent, retrieved a thread of cotton from the floor. 'We don't drop cotton in the ward, Nurse Kleinert.' Then: 'You should have the arm in a sling when you are ready for sleep, Mr Sloan. It will prevent movement.'

Sloan nodded.

'If there is anything else . . . ?'

'You could read to me.'

Miss Smythe seemed to understand immediately. 'Ah, the voice. . . .' She shrugged, as if to discount its value, left the ward.

'I like her,' Sloan said.

'Do you really need a bottle?'

'Only beer.'

She hesitated. 'I expect I could get one.'

'You do that, Ginger.'

They heard the contralto, a door close against it. He said: 'What will happen if I practise the Complete Breath?'

'Now?'

'When the ribs are better.'

'You will get breasts like Miss Smythe.'

He laughed and she felt the pain leap within the wall of his chest.

'Like footballs,' she said.

'You mustn't make me laugh.'

'You know what she did to me?'

'You told me.'

'The tin——?'

'Yes. For the hair-combings.'

She shook down the mercury in the thermometer, pushed it between his lips. The jokes, the words were like things gone sour in the mouth. She said seriously: 'Don't joke any more.'

'All right.'

Someone else had said that: those precise words in response to one of the sterile jokes. What kind of a joke had it been? He closed his eyes, listening for the sounds of association. Where was it said? Who had said it? Don't joke any more. You said you wouldn't joke. All right. There had been the feel of heat, flame against the membrane of the eyelids, the rustle of burning wood and the fall of brands into the bed of soft grey ash. Don't joke any more. The night and the river and the sound of the river, a luminous silver light behind the tongues of fire, behind the diaphanous curtain of night that separated the camp-fire from the river; the thin whisper from the well of pain. Haggard had said it. Sloan: Yes? Don't joke any more: All right. A joke about the river and the ice-floe coming down with the polar-bear on it. I keep thinking of the river and the leg and it hurts and it's terribly hot: I'll move it out the fire: You said you wouldn't joke: All right. *All right.* Tom . . . Tom's my name. Poor Tom . . . poor Tom bloody Haggard. I could have lifted your tight little bird's-body gone frail with sickness and forded the river and carried it in my arms through the timber up through the timber through those halls of red and scented wood up and through orientating myself by the glimpses of the hills and the sun and the peaks of the Ondes through those aromatic haunts of bird and leopard through and under the carapaces of bird-trembling leaf and the swooning scent of the juniper and the resin of it so close and thick with life under the crimson bark it seemed you could cut it and have it run down the hand and wrist through and along the trail compassed by the mind and the eyes and the instinct for direction grown on the years until the fire-observation post would be there maintained and neat and not derelict and manned or, if not manned, with water and bully and powdered milk and even a medical-kit with antibiotics and a field telephone that would bring the rough and gritty voice of Verity the Forest Officer and later, perhaps, a helicopter of the Forest Fire Service to come with its great and bird-scattering noise of succour . . . that was how close it was, Tom . . . poor dead Tom . . . don't joke any more . . . all right . . . there's not a real joke left, only the echoes of jokes, the

broken ribs of jokes, dead jokes like a laugh in a tomb or an empty church.

She held his suddenly sweating face with both hands and kissed him on the mouth and he said, trembling: 'He beat me, Ginger . . .'

'Don't talk about it.'

'He beat me. He cut me with the mattock until my strength had gone and then he cracked me like a twig . . .'

She kissed him again, still holding his face and the beard against her chin, a child's kiss of love and solicitude.

'He beat me . . .'

'All right,' she whispered. 'He beat you. But it doesn't matter.' She kissed him, opening his mouth as if she would draw his pain and take it unto herself. She felt his tears on her cheek and the taste of tears coming to her parted lips and, then, still holding this salt and trembling kiss, took her hands from his face and embraced him, holding him and the shudder of pain that was of the mind and of the ribs entering her own body. 'I love you, Harry,' she said. 'Love you . . .' She spoke into his mouth, her voice hollow in its cavern and the shudder taking both their bodies. 'I can't hold you,' he said, his voice thick in her opened mouth. 'I can't put my arms up to hold you . . .' And she said: 'I'll hold you tight enough for both . . .' 'Not too tight,' he said, and she felt the pain in the ribs and they laughed softly, the laugh, now, having no bitterness, no source in anything but this fruiting love, this love which took their murmuring voices and commingled them so that they lost clarity and identity in the joint cavern of their mouths and there was one voice one tongue one warmth of heat and spittle one breath the breath from each of them in the lungs of each of them and even the staleness shared and her womb opening and contracting and opening and its desperate waste its unrequited flood its transpiercing pain which was his own pain its seed which was his own seed . . . 'Harry, Harry, Harry,' she said in this wet union of the mouths which was all they could have. 'Harry, Harry. I love you, love you, love you . . .' And his own voice: 'Little Ginger, little Emma'; and his left hand under her cap, under its stiffness in the chignon of her coiled hair and she divining his intent, his desire, her hands urgent on the cap as if it were her clothes she removed and her nakedness she revealed and the hair, then, falling about them so that he spoke now in its sweetness, its enveloping musky sweetness, this living texture of her which was all he could have of her, her hands parting and arranging the hair around his eyes, cheeks and mouth and his desire erect

even against the pain of Haggard and the pain of the ribs and the blood which beat now in pulses of pain in the stump of his finger. 'I want you and love you,' he told her softly and he found her mouth within that dark and coarse-sweet tunnel of hair, his body charged now with currents of pain and ecstasy and pain again. 'God! how I want you,' he murmured.

She pulled away so that the hair fell from him to leave him cold and uncovered; as if a fringed garment had been slowly withdrawn. She said: 'You could have me, Harry. You could have me now——'

'Except for the ribs,' he said.

'And me also.' She stroked significantly with both hands over and down the throb of pain which ran to her groin with the release of emotion.

He nodded, understanding her. 'Why should you tell me this?' he asked gently.

She kissed him again. 'Because I would give you anything, tell you anything. There is nothing I would not give you. I want you to know me, all of me, take me when I'm nice for you, understand me when I'm not, *know* me, love me, always love me, darling . . .'

'You shouldn't love me like that,' he told her. 'I'm no good to you. I'd be death to you. I'm death to everyone.'

'No, you're not. You're life, a wonderful golden life. . . .' She lifted his bandaged hand, pressed it to her cheek and he felt the warmth of her cheek through the bandage. 'It's the finger I might have stroked you with,' he told her.

'I'll never feel it now, will I?' She began to cry.

'There are other fingers, all wanting you, Ginger. You'll never miss it. You can close your eyes and I'll stroke you and you won't even know it's gone. I promise.'

'Ah, Harry . . .' She kissed him, gripping his shoulders so that he gasped with pain. 'I keep forgetting. I'm sorry, darling . . .' She stood, began to bunch the hair into the confines of the starched cap. 'I look a mess, don't I?'

'You look wonderful.'

She pinned the hair with quick expert pushes of the fingers, smoothed her apron. 'If you see any hairpins pick them up.'

He shook his head. 'Can't bend.'

'No. Of course not. I keep forgetting. But Miss Smythe hates hairpins.' She spoke breathlessly. 'Do I look a mess?' The hands smoothed again. She bent over him, titillating her cheek against his beard. She whispered: 'You better heal those ribs, darling—so I can get at you.'

He smiled, closed his eyes, feeling the first languid touches of sleep. 'I can hardly wait . . .' her feet around the bed and the sheet tightening and her hands adjusting the pillow . . . 'Hardly wait . . .' Her voice spoke behind this somnolence: 'I forgot the temperature . . . forgot . . . forgot . . .'

The generator came to life when she entered the dispensary, immediately—as if it had been synchronised to the opening of the door. She stood in the harsh and sudden light, aware of her disarray, the desire which must lie still in her eyes and mouth. Miss Smythe stood by the window, a letter and a tattered envelope in her hand. She turned, stared. 'You randy little tart,' Miss Smythe said.

He came from sleep, that shallow which lay beneath the weight of heat, pain and distant dam-noise, and he saw that the night lay thick in the ward, so thick he could not penetrate it; only slowly, the nearer gleams of the rucked sheet and the alloy of the empty beds and the window opposite which, unhazing into its paler square, silhouetted the shape at the foot of the bed. He watched it form. There was an austerity about it; the high white coif and the white bodice—the linen of a nun: in a moment the shape would genuflect and a crucifix swing. He smelled sulphur soap. A big serene face came through greyness, through the parting veils of sleep, came with its beautiful modulations of voice. 'Did I wake you, Mr Sloan?'

'Miss Smythe?'

'Yes. Did I wake you?'

'Not really.'

'How do you feel?'

'Rough.'

'You mean ill?'

'No. Just rough.'

She came to him, touched his forehead.

'What time is it?' he asked.

'Nearly dawn.' The hand stayed on his temple. 'You're very hot.'

He felt the coolness of her fingers. 'How do you manage it?'

'The coolth?'

'Yes.' He smiled at her use of the word.

'It's a knack,' she said. 'And I don't let myself get excited—not like Emma.'

He stared guiltily.

'I know all about it,' she said.

'Poor little Ginger.'

'You ought to know better.'

'Yes.'

'You'll be careful with her, won't you?'

'I suppose so.'

'That means you won't.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I have three broken ribs . . .' He watched her go to the foot of the bed, the snowy breast retreating into gloom and the face disapproving. 'You look like a Mother Superior,' he told her.

'The ribs will get better,' she said. 'And then——'

'Yes?'

'You will get her into trouble.'

He nodded.

'I am not joking, Mr Sloan.'

'Neither am I. It will be very serious, and very pleasant, when I get her into trouble.'

She smiled unexpectedly. 'Should I wash you now?'

'In sulphur soap?'

'If you like.'

'Later,' he said. 'Just talk to me. Read to me. Anything.' She was still now; the hands composed and the face clean and imperious in the breaking daylight. 'I always liked the night-duties,' she told him. 'The silent night and then the first pink of the sunrise.'

'It sounds like poetry.'

She smiled again.

'Anything would sound like poetry in *your* mouth, Miss Smythe.'

She nodded. The beauty of her voice was something she accepted, beyond the facile reach of flattery. 'But I can't sing a note,' she said. 'That's funny, isn't it?'

'You don't have to.'

The hands unfolded. 'You talk like a man making love.'

He shook his head. 'I can't manage the pair of you, Miss Smythe.' Then: 'I don't think I'll have the sulphur soap. Emma might not like me smelling of sulphur soap.'

'Mr Sloan.'

'Yes?'

'Will you go back there?'

'The dam?'

'Ah, you understood me.'

'Yes. I understood you.' He lifted his left hand very slowly, began to pull the beard into a spike. 'I don't know. He beat me, that ought to be the end of it. And I've no strength left.'

'The strength will return.'

He stared at her. 'I won't go back.'

She was silent, the fat face suddenly compassionate.

'You don't believe me, do you?'

'No.'

'All right,' he said. 'I'll go back. I'll go back—again and again and again until he kills me.'

'Senseless fighting. Like the beasts.'

'No,' he said. 'You're wrong. They fight—but never senselessly, never without reason: always for something—food, shelter, leadership, a female.'

'But you're not an animal, Mr Sloan; not even a primitive. You should revere the body, honour the flesh.'

He touched his cut and bandaged hand. 'You ought to tell Férol.'

'Honour the flesh,' she repeated.

'A medical view.'

'A Christian view.'

The invisible crucifix swung. He said: 'You're a Mother Superior all right.'

'Listen,' she began. Then, suspiciously: 'You're just trying to make me talk.'

'That's right.'

'You really want me to read to you?'

'Yes.'

'What shall I read? A book? A newspaper? A medical article?'

'Anything.' He shut his eyes. He felt her unmoving silence, a change in her; as if she had become ardent. The voice came in deep cadences: 'I'll read something to you. But you mustn't make a joke. It's very—personal.'

'I promise.' He heard the rustle of paper in her hands, then the voice again. 'I am reading from a letter, a letter written by a sick man twelve years ago.' The voice paused. Then, slowly, reading with difficulty in the grey light: *'I sometimes stare inwards at a mind peopled by the images of the ravaged. There can be no relief then? Only this ineffectual scratching on the enormous cyst of universal suffering. Only a Christ or a saint can attain it. Anyone less perfect is doomed to unsatisfaction, the pain growing and the eventual failure and the looking-back at the sombre processions of the afflicted, the images all coalescing into one great and irrefragable question—why? They revolve sometimes within the mind like some macabre wheel of rotting dummies, the destroyed faces and the shrivelled limbs and the distorted bellies rotating into light, the brief plea, then the turning into shadow and the next and the next and the next. If only one owned the power of healing; to walk through a world and put*

out one's hand . . . Of course, this has always existed in me among all the other protests, the other rebellions that burned themselves out as a part of the tempering process of development, still existing, then remaining isolate and undimissible. No word or phrase can express it. There is only the eternal flesh of the stricken—a catalyst to produce guilt, emotion, doubt; a whole string of reactions built and thriving on impotency. I know that, medically, abstracts are absurd. Bacteria, tissue, temperature; the result is predictable—a simple pathogenesis. And yet there is a doubt somewhere. One strives in one's work for wholeness—it can have no other meaning. There is surely an underlying principle, never consciously formulated, that man cannot evolve or flower within some pain-wracked, malformed carcass. Adversity is never ennobling, suffering always an embittering process in which the spirit atrophies. So the goal is perfection—godly, distant. One sees it like a grail in the sky. If it is a mirage then everything is meaningless.”

She was silent now. He heard the hands fold the letter. The voice had been beautiful in the quiet ward, seeming to flow over and about him. She said: ‘You hear that sentence? That terrible yearning? . . . if only one owned the power of healing, to walk through a world and put out one's hand . . .’ The pause again. ‘Are you asleep, Mr Sloan?’

‘No.’

‘Don't you see what I'm trying to say? This man died of love for his fellow creatures. It consumed him. He venerated them, their poor sick bodies. He wanted to heal the flesh—not knock it about. He would never lift a hand to another man—only a hand of healing. He hated violence. He was not a saint. He was not even a great doctor. But he had more of the Christ in him than most of us. He would strive with love, compassion and knowledge—and as much energy as he could draw from his thin, ailing body. If he had had your strength, *your* body . . .’ The words were faintly accusing.

‘You've been talking to Jan Kleinert.’

‘Yes. He says you cannot stop the dam, that your instinct is to fight but that there is nothing left to fight—except other men.’

‘A man should fight,’ he said stubbornly. ‘Whether it is disease—or dams. Even your dead saint would tell you that.’ He felt suddenly weary. ‘Is there any real difference? A healthy body; a wild paradise. Bacteria invading the one; men and machines, greed and materialism invading the other . . .’ The words seemed inexplicably shallow. ‘Who was he?’ he asked, without real interest.

‘Oh, names don't matter,’ Miss Smythe said. The voice was forlorn. ‘He worked in the kampongs in the Dutch East Indies before the war—that was where we met. There was a contemptuous Malay

phrase for his kind of man; it meant a man who didn't fit in the fashionable end of Batavia, a man who offended the noses of the fat Dutch colonials with the smell of yaws, leprosy and smallpox. He was interned during the war—his dysentery started then—and I went with him to Sumatra on the first of the post-war smallpox epidemics. Even then he couldn't work more than four hours daily but *he* was the one who identified the carriers as Madura fishermen, traced it back to Malacca. The Government sent him a nice letter. Later he returned to Java and he went up to the hill-villages with WHO. That was when he wrote me this letter. I remember when he came down. He was dying with amoebic ulcerations. He weighed seven stones.' The voice stopped and he heard three small and separate explosions in the gorge. 'That makes you smile, doesn't it? I saw your lips twitch. A great obese woman like me—and a frail little man of seven stones . . .' He opened his eyes to the first pallors of morning. 'I don't know if we'd have married. I shall never know, shall I?'

'I didn't smile,' he said. He watched her cross the ward.

'I'll get you some nice scented soap,' she said. 'It's called Alpine Flowers. You'll smell wonderful for Emma.' She seemed reluctant to leave—as if there were something she wanted from him. 'He liked my voice,' she said. He heard the letter crackle in her hand. She was staring at him. There is no more to the letter than that, he thought; this string of cold and artificial phrases. Later, perhaps, she will read it for the thousandth time, search again for some undetected message, a hint of warmth.

'It's a beautiful letter,' he said uneasily. Then, lying: 'It's a *kind* of love-letter. He wouldn't write like that to someone he didn't love.' The face nodded in gratitude. The stump was throbbing and he held the hand at throat level to relieve the pressure, watched the window and the complexion of the coming day.

Miss Smythe, too, watched this complexion of early light. It fell from the dispensary window on the pages of the letter. The letter had not browned but its creases were defined with dirt and there was a tear across one of the pages which she had stuck with transparent tape. 'I ought not to carry you about, dear,' she said to the letter. 'But we don't want the ants to get you.' She had two photographs of him; the first taken a long time ago in one of the up-country leprosaria—one of those furtive settlements on forest backwaters with dripping palm fronds and white shirts and rickety huts in which everything looked curiously archaic; the second taken

later in the garden of the Sultan of Djogja, the group posed under a striped umbrella in the shade of a great waringen tree and, in the foreground, the wild cocks spread ferociously in wicker cages. She did not show these photographs to people. In the earlier picture some trick of light had touched his face so that it looked more nodular, more leonine than those of the lepers: people always pointed to another man with a clear, regular face and asked: 'Is that the doctor?' noticing, then, with embarrassment, that the man had naked feet and no tocs. In the later picture one of the cocks had put its claw through the cage at the moment of exposure so that the tip of the talon gave the impression that he wore an absurdly long moustache.

The letter was the better currency. It was more evocative. She had only to touch it, to stare inward—and there were the imperishable pictures stuck on the walls of the mind like cut-outs. There were dead, nostalgic names affixed to the pictures: Batavia, the Koningsplein, the Waterlooplein, the Molenvliet Canal. Remember the canal? The bleached native washing and the women scrubbing on the stone steps and the bamboo rafts? The clock is striking in the square and in a moment they will open the sluices and a floating palm-leaf will spin suddenly and the brown soil of the hills will swirl in the current and, soon, *you* will walk from behind the arch of the Amsterdam Gate. And, then, the picture which always seems painted in pigments of the sun and soil; the kampong on the hill-road and the men coming down it, the palangki rocking on the shoulders and the flesh cut with the weight of it and a fallen head-cloth snake-like and brilliant in the dust and the body of the diseased boy sliding inside like a shrivelled mummy and the palangki slipping and the men suddenly apathetic and the whole of it collapsing, spilling its pathetic bit of bone and tissue so that it lies staring into the sun and the men indifferent, not wanting to put their fingers on the purulence and then *you* there, in the picture, picking up the boy and the arms bare against the cratered flesh and the light aureoling your hair and the pain in your face so intense that it seems that a dreadful and insufferable compassion thrusts you beyond and above and unreachably distant from them, from me, from all . . . 'Yes, my sweet,' she whispered. 'I remember.' And the hut with the basket depending from the eaves and a bambor pole set against it to the ground, cut along its length into nodes, and a hen, red-feathered, climbing the improvised ladder to the basket where the eggs lie in safety: and, then, under the betel-palm and into the hut, your thin back going into shadow and across the

patterns of light which are yellow stencils on the earth floor and the sweet odour of invaded flesh and the child, a girl, with a retarded face and vomit on the arm and sores like figs turned inside out and a balloon for an abdomen and your voice: 'The child has roundworm as well as yaws . . .' Why should that stay in the mind? That quiet professional sentence with only love for the child in it? But it doesn't matter what is said so long as it's *your* voice I hear, so long as the voice stays clear and does not fade and get quiet with age. And there are other quiet words, lodged and immovable in the mind: speaking now not in Java but from that Bornean field, bounded on three sides by jungle rubber and on the other by the path and the rice-field and, within the field and near to the path, the shrine built out of cane with a roof of green leaf and on the shrine an offering of rice and a bamboo bottle of water and a girl kneeling before it, the young face mottled by sunlight and the back bent in appeasement and her devotion beautiful to see and your hand on my arm and your voice, with a kind of reverence in it: 'Only a rice-god. No capital letters. Only a rice-god.' We mounted our bicycles, rode away down the stippled path.

Miss Smythe put the letter into its envelope. Then she withdrew it, took a new envelope from Brooke's drawer, put the letter inside and sealed it. 'There,' she said. 'That'll keep you nice and clean. And I'll try not to open you.' She slipped the envelope down her bodice where it lay cold for a moment in the vee of her breasts. The coldness spread. Is this *all* I have? she asked herself in desperation. This scrap of paper, a few words echoing in the mind? Isn't there a word of love somewhere that was meant for me alone? A touch of the fingers which knew my flesh for a second in the way I wanted you to know it? Surely, somewhere . . . ?

She turned from the window. She could hear Emma Kleinert's feet in the corridor. She felt a quick burn of envy. The feet were rapid, going to the ward, going to where Harry Sloan lay. Three rib fractures and an amputated finger and seventeen wounds, she thought with satisfaction: it'll be a long time before they can do *that*. She stroked her wide hips, feeling the size and solidity of her body. Then she lifted her skirts, stared at the thick legs that had no ankles. It did not seem possible there was a time she had ridden a bicycle.

He left the medical centre on the fifteenth day after the fight, late in the day, leaving Staedtler's Gorge and taking the road to Mirembe so that he reached the headquarters of the Game Reserve two hours after sundown. A stillness lay on the buildings and the compounds,

not even broken by the transport pool. The stillness came from the plain. He went to his room, that room which he had used as a boy. The room was the same but the view from the window had changed. He could not see the plain or the nearer trees of it or any part of the hill line, only the flank of the petrol dump and a section of the roof of the laboratory extension and, further, the straw roofs of the scout houses.

There was a note from Freeland on his locker, typewritten and initialled, which asked him to come later in the evening to the Warden's quarters. The paper was faintly perfumed and he screwed it into a ball, threw it from the window. Then he switched off the light, lay on the bed. The ribs were strapped and there was no pain unless he performed sudden actions of the right arm.

He slept until nine-thirty. Then he washed, went through the brick-and-timber avenues to Freeland's house. It had been Craven's house and it was a good house with a pleasant wooden bloom and a veranda and a view across plantations to the western steppe. Freeland's wife sat on the veranda, sunk in the folds of a kimono, fingering the pages of the *Standard* but not reading because the light had gone. She was a quiet woman with a sullen Jewish face and black straight hair brushed and held by combs absolutely smooth to the head and a white central parting so exact it gave the effect of bisection. She nodded to him, not greeting or displaying warmth or any kind of commiseration, and he passed her without speaking, across the veranda and into the house.

Freeland came from his bath, the hair wet at the neck and the lemon scent of verbena about him. He wore a green silk dressing-gown which revealed the caramel flesh of the throat and the black hairs on it, Indian slippers embroidered like a woman's mules. He said, without affection: 'Ah, Sloan.' Then, as a formality: 'I hope you are recovered.' Sloan saw the luminous eyes go to his right hand. He said politely: 'Yes. I'm all right.' The room disturbed him, affecting him immediately like a woman passed in a street who exudes the scent of some fragrant attar. It was a voluptuous room, over-ornamented as if the bazaars had been pillaged for everything bright and Oriental. The green of the gown reflected on the surfaces of silver pots and Benares brassware, moved in mirrors with intricate frames. Freeland offered him a cigarette and the box was of carved sandalwood and a scent like incense came when the lid opened. He declined and Freeland smiled his strange intriguer's-smile and the hands produced a pipe and a package of tobacco with a Chinese wrapper. 'Do you care for hong-yen?'

'No.'

'I started it in the war when I could get nothing else. Then I acquired the taste.' The fingers stuffed red tobacco fibres into the bowl of the pipe. A delicate gold snake curled down its stem. Freeland lighted it, drew; light glowed on the face and, momentarily, the face was yellow and baleful like the amber mask of the fertility-god on the wall. He said: 'What I can't understand is why you couldn't go straight to the Chief Engineer or someone in authority when you found the fence damaged and the snares set. They'd have put it right. You didn't have to beat the man up, provoke him into further acts. None of this would have happened if you'd gone to Languirand. As it is . . .' Freeland shrugged. 'You've caused me a lot of trouble, Sloan. I've had to answer awkward questions. I've had to defend you. The Ministry don't like it.' The fingers tapped in annoyance on the bowl of the pipe. 'And I don't like it, either.'

'You don't have to defend me,' Sloan said. 'Just defend the Reserve.'

The fingers went from the bowl to the snake, stroking sensuously at its metal twist. 'You're always on the verge of impertinence, aren't you?'

'Guy,' the woman's voice called from the veranda. 'Guy . . .'

'A moment,' Freeland said. He left the room for the veranda. Sloan saw that a serpent coiled on the back of the dressing-gown. The breath of verbena touched him, mingled with the scent of the hong-yen. The man was exquisite, he thought; the only word for him. The closets would yield more of the silk gowns and the decorated slippers: there would be fripperies of silk and Tenebrific lace, little Chinese perfume-jars into which he and his sullen woman would dip before they . . . Freeland came back. 'We're having drinks, Sloan. What will you have?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing at all?'

'No.'

'We shan't drink without you.'

Sloan stared. Perhaps this was some code of Oriental hospitality. 'All right,' he said. 'Gin.'

Freeland mixed drinks, took one out to the woman, returned. The gown swung like a matador's cape and Sloan saw that he was naked beneath it. 'You know,' Freeland said. 'I don't feel comfortable until I'm back home, shaved and bathed. At one time I'd be out in bush weeks at a time. Now . . .' He smiled. 'We're civilised people.' He accented it: 'Civilised.'

Sloan watched the tongue dart into the thick green syrup of the cocktail. The tongue, too, was serpentine.

Freeland said: 'Gin doesn't seem right for a man like you.'

'No? What should I drink?'

The smile widened: the eyes were hostile. 'Stream-water. You should bottle stream-water from some rill in the wilderness.'

Sloan finished his gin. 'Why did you ask me here?'

Freeland picked up a leaf of paper from a teak table with a lacquered top, studied it. The points for discussion had been listed. 'The fighting—I've dealt with that. Anthrax. Yes, anthrax. Just cast your mind back to that day with Bickerton. You remember the impala?'

'Yes.'

'And that Bickerton was to deliver it to the vet. station?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that's what it was. Anthrax.'

'So?'

'Do you remember Bickerton saying that the camp should be warned?'

'Something like that.'

Freeland nodded. 'And did you, then, go on to the camp, call at the company office, visit the saloon on that absurd business of the notice-board?'

'Yes.'

The tongue flickered again in the cocktail. 'But you didn't report the danger of anthrax?'

'No.'

'Wasn't it your duty to do so?'

'Not without confirmation.'

'But a warning, Sloan. A warning of the possibility. Surely . . . ?'

'The areas would be warned after confirmation. That's the normal procedure—'

'Don't tell me about procedures. I've spent my life on procedures—'

'Guy,' the woman called sullenly.

Freeland grimaced. 'I'm off again.' He lifted the drink-tray. 'You want another?'

'No.'

The silk gown went, flared and verberated, to the veranda. He heard their low conspiratorial talk, the splash of liquid in a glass, a silence, the woman's voice soft and languorous in the throat. Freeland came back. His pipe had gone out. 'You know very well it

was your duty,' he said. 'But you were so obsessed with this—triviality of the board that you forgot.' The voice sharpened. 'Or I hope you forgot. I hope there was no deliberate intent to——' The eyes searched him. 'No, you wouldn't do that. It was just damn negligence. Suppose this man at the fence—what was his name——?

'Piaf.'

'—Suppose this man Piaf or, indeed, any man from the camp, had trapped an infected animal, taken it back for eating. Wouldn't an early warning have been important?' The shoulders shrugged. 'I don't want to make too much of this. We put out a general warning within twenty-four hours and no harm was done. But that one day could have been vital. And it's just another example of your lack of attunement to the Department.' He consulted the sheet of paper. 'Now for Mickey Quinn. I've been under pressure from the Society of White Hunters. Also from his company. And there've been one or two nudges from the Ministry. Have you had a change of heart, Sloan?'

'No.'

'I see. Well, I'll tell you in a moment about Quinn.' The finger ran down the list. 'Do you know the number of reported offences against the Game Ordinance since you've been away? In the vicinity of the dam?'

Sloan shrugged.

'One hundred and seven. No fewer than one hundred and seven. And it'll get worse.'

'Not with me around.'

Freeland shook his head. 'Tell me, Sloan.' The voice held curiosity. 'Tell me. How would you define the nature, the purpose of a Game Officer's work?'

'To preserve wild life.'

'As simple as that?'

'Yes.'

'Won't you qualify it?'

'No.'

'Then I'll complete it for you. To preserve wild life—provided it does not conflict with man and his enterprises.' The voice seemed to underline it. 'Would you agree?'

Sloan said nothing.

'That's really the crux of the whole thing, isn't it? The heart of your own private conflict?'

'Yes.'

'If you can't accept that definition, work and live by it, you'll

have to clear out.' He began to revolve the green liquid of the cocktail within the glass. Sloan watched its oleaginous whirl, the glint of the ruby in its gold claw. 'My dear Sloan, we can't carry on a vendetta against the men of the dam, create the kind of tensions and resentments which will lead to more violence. We can't enforce the unenforceable. We can't expect the game to co-exist with this enormous installation, can we?' The voice, now, was sweet with reasonableness. 'You must surely see that. Come: come over here. I'll show you what we're going to do.'

He led Sloan to another of the teak tables, near to the wall. A slender roll of paper lay thereon, secured with a silk thread around its waist. He removed the thread, unrolled the paper. It was a map, drawn and hatched in coloured inks. 'Here, stick the upper edge under this picture-frame. Now spread it down the wall. Good. We can see what we're talking about. That's right. Put your mitt on it.' Freeland stared at the raw finger stump. 'It's a big ragged, isn't it?'

'Not so good.'

'Brooke?'

'Yes.'

'I heard about him. A real quack . . .

'Yes. He's bad.'

'You ought to have that trimmed.'

'Yes.'

'You could go to the military at Mababe or down to Port of Kuru.'

'Maybe.'

'You do that.' Freeland released his hand and the corner of the map rolled upward. He aligned it again. 'Look—these coloured lines and blocks . . .' He smiled. 'I'm getting as bad as Bickerton. But it makes things clearer, it really does. As you can see, it's a map of Mirembé, the Lake, the Suswa Valley, and some of the adjacent country; or, broadly, the game areas within our jurisdiction. Now, let me preface this with a simple explanation of policy and, let me add, this is *official* policy, Sloan, approved by the Minister and for which we'll get the legislation soon.' The mouthpiece of the pipe ran sensitively over the map. 'There's a political background here and we have to look further than the narrow field of game reservation. Soon, the Territory will get its independence. At the best, we're merely caretakers. We can't be certain that the new boys will have the slightest interest in protecting wild life. Perhaps, in a year or two, there won't even be a Game Department. But one thing is

certain—it'd be fatal to try to preserve wild life everywhere. Of course, you've heard all this before. You're as sick of the subject as I am. But time is passing. The dam is getting higher. We *have* to make provision. You do agree?'

'Yes.'

'The hydro-electric scheme is absolutely paramount. Nothing is more important. Nothing can be permitted to delay or impede it. These people want power and irrigation, productive land. They don't want a glorified zoo.' Freeland smiled. 'That's *their* idea of paradise—and they'll get what they want. After all, they've been living in a zoo since prehistory. They've seen the whites come, shoot up nine-tenths of the game; you can't blame them if all that bunk about priceless heritage bounces off their thick skulls; you can't blame them for wondering why it's suddenly so urgent to preserve the remaining tenth.'

Sloan said unpleasantly: 'As you say, I've heard it all before.'

'Well, I wouldn't expect *you* to agree. So I'll make it short. I'll tell you what the Minister's decided. The land is to be divided into three zones—hatched here in these lovely colours.' The fingers began to glide on the map, as if the wetness of its rivers, the texture of its soil could be felt on the fingers. 'The pale blue zone consists of reserves and sanctuaries in which there is no human enterprise, in which, for one reason or another, it's unlikely there ever will be human enterprise. Here, on the blue, the game will stay. The green zone consists of areas in which there's game *and* human enterprise—mainly domestic stock. The red zone represents those areas in which the interests of agriculture and industry are paramount and from which the game must go.' He repeated it: 'From which the game must go.'

Sloan stared at the map, at the tiny blue and green islands of colour, at the great washes of red. 'There's a lot of red,' he said. It seemed that his throat had dried. 'A hell of a lot of red.'

'Yes,' Freeland said. 'It's the end of the Reserve. There'll be a small Reserve here, and a partial Game Reserve here, and several of these small controlled areas. And in the green zone some agreement will have to be reached on the proportion of wild life; anything over that will be culled for meat by the native peoples.'

Sloan touched the map, feeling the red as if it were an evil rash on the skin. 'The plain has gone,' he said. 'Except for this little bit . . .'

'Yes.'

'And the valley under water . . .'

'Yes.'

'And all around the valley and around the lake . . .

Freeland nodded. 'All gone.'

'And it will finish the migrations. They'll come out of here to where there's no protection. They'll never reach the lake . . .' He trembled. 'What kind of bastard worked this out?'

'A lot of bastards,' Freeland said evenly. 'A lot of bastards who've given a lot of thought and time, who've pleaded with the Native Affairs and the blacks who'll be wearing the top hats when we've gone, who've had to beg to get those few miserable blue patches.' He let the map roll upward so that it hung, rolled, on the lower edge of the picture-frame. The picture was of an enormous empty plain with a pair of fish-eagles in the foreground, the birds accenting the solitariness of the plain. Now, the picture was derisive. 'I'm sorry for you, Sloan. I'm sorry for any man who wants to fight but can't find his true enemy. But what *is* the enemy? Not me or Quinn or Férol or that boy with the board. The enemy is *change*, the passing of things. We're all caught in it, moving along with it . . .' He turned from the map. 'Have another drink.'

'No.'

'Of course, most of the valley will flood. You should see the plans they have for the lake that's going to form.' The voice gained enthusiasm. 'Fishing and tourist industries, marine drives and promenades, hotels and tourist rondavels, boating and water ski-ing. There's something rather wonderful about it all; that great dam, the money, power and food it will bring, wonderful what man can do when he bends his will to it.'

'Wonderful,' Sloan said. The stump was pulsing and he placed the hand, fingers upward, on his breast-bone.

'Guy,' the woman called softly. The voice, coming from the vine-sweet dark of the veranda, was like an invitation. Freeland's face changed, the eyes deepening. It was plain that the night and the veranda and this raven woman, there in the kimono, had significance for him. Sloan felt the cord of sensuality that connected them, tightening, pulling Freeland from him, from the room, from this contemplation of the map. 'I'll go now,' Sloan said and the swart face nodded in relief.

'One thing more,' Freeland said. 'I'm not waiting for the Government Printer. The partition of the Reserve will start right now. That means the camp is free to do as it likes. They're badly in need of fresh meat and they can never get enough of it. I've given permission for Quinn to shoot for them. He'll keep them supplied and

it'll give him a chance to earn a little money. Later, for what it's worth, I'll reinstate him.'

The woman did not look up when he left the veranda. A scent-bottle with a rubber bulb was at her feet and he could smell its breath heavy in the air, on her gown and flesh. He looked back when he reached the bend of the path, staring across the foliage of bushes. All the lights had been extinguished and the veranda lay in shadow but he could see their shapes cut black in the shadow, one shape now, and Freeland's mouth and nostrils opening to the stimulus of the perfume, the silk of the gown against the silk of the kimono and the silks opening on their warm and eager flesh, it all unseen but imagined, the night of the veranda suddenly indecorous and his own wanting like a virus in the blood. He felt unbearably alone, wanting Emma, wanting solace, wanting warmth, wanting anything that would fall across the mind, efface this redness of the map.

Part 5

THE HIGH WALL

THE SHORT RAIN HAD failed: there was drought in the land and the river was lower now than at any time since the beginning of the dam. There had been two long rains in which the dam had felt the power of the river and in the first of these much water had come from the catchment areas below the Ondes so that the river rose even above the lips of the coffer and there had been three days at the peak when it seemed that the piers, those high concrete molars which would brace the arch of the dam, must disroot from the bedrock. But the peak had passed and the river fell and when the long rain came again the wall had grown high, higher to the piers, and the pinnacles of the piers were like medieval turrets above the arch which grew slender from its base. The second of the long rains was undramatic. The river rose, but at its confluence with the Okui there was no great power of water from the head reaches of the smaller river, and the Suswa came to the dam, filled with the rain and snows of the Ondes (not grey-white with snow-water but brown and warm from distance) and still formidable but without fury or intent to destroy.

Now, after the failure of the short rain and the land waterless and the river low and barely moving and the wall growing higher for the third of the long rains, the men of Alpe-Mounie, the Engineer, the designer, the Camp-Master, the African labour, all knew that the river was powerless to break the dam, that it was there, as immovable as the walls of the gorge with which it integrated: that now, this day, this morning of unremarkable skies and immense significance, the river would stop, that the spews of leaf-brown water from the tunnels above the bed (which was all that remained of free water) would choke this day behind the seals.

A party of men had gathered on the parapet in the centre of the arch. The parapet was three hundred feet above low-water level and, when the river was stopped and the ceremonies over, they would build higher to the summits of the piers so that the arch would run in one smooth and unturretted crescent from bank to bank. They were quiet, this party of chosen men; standing in small awed groups. Like men at a funeral wake, Kleinert thought, a sense of strain and vigil in the faces, even going softly to the lip of the

parapet to stare down as if to a dug grave. There was something missing, he knew: this, the moment which symbolised success, this point to which years of toil under equatorial suns had led them, had nothing of elation in it. The high wall had risen but the river had strangled; they had come to celebrate not a triumph but a moment of death. He looked at the groups, past Schreiber's head with its feathers of white hair lifting in wind, along the curving top of the dam. They stood in early sun, some hatless, some smoking and the hands quick and the heels grinding nervously on butts, some talking and the voices coming on wind in little dismembered phrases, some leaving the groups to stand, then, apart and balanced on the concrete lip, leant backward because of the great height and staring from these postures of caution through the dispelling mists of night and down to the river; Languirand there, gaunt and feverish; and, beyond him, Férol, blue-bandannaed and helmeted and black-ragged of moustache and surrounded by men, yet set apart in his aura of unchallengeable power; and, further, the ruddy face of Zeffirelli and men from the river-gauging stations and engineers of the irrigation and black faces from the department of Native Commissioners and one small man with a grey cadaver's-skin and an ancient topee who did not seem to know anyone and men with imperative faces who had brought with them the garb and accents of the Ministries. The shores and hills of the gorge fluttered with people: they had come from the settlement, the camp and the township, even from the plantations on the fringe of the plain, to see this death of the river.

Kleinert went to the edge of the parapet, looked down. The concrete fell in one smooth vertiginous cliff, whitening and taking glare now from the sun, the lines which defined the growth of its construction drawing the eye into shifts of perspective and the vestiges of mist coming like hoops of smoke up the concrete so that the river and the dam and the light were unstill, all moving in glaring patterns and bringing movement, forward movement, into his own poised body. He stepped back a foot; now he could see only the upper sweep of the concrete and the breaks in the concrete where the sluices would be and, far below, the vague turbulence where the river came from the tunnels in sluggish brown cascades. He followed the line of the river. It had shrunk in the drought and he could see the declivity of its exposed shores and the fester of slime and dead vegetation that marked them. It ran to the mouth of the gorge, not running or having any vigour of life, but creeping abjectly and with only the impetus of its spilling from the upstream

cararacts. From the mouth of the gorge, he knew, one would see the country falling in dried terraces to the now-dry marsh and to the plain; and, on the plain, the tented Army camp which had been there since the October riots.

He felt Schreiber's hand on his arm. 'Listen,' Schreiber said. He turned and the wind had blown the feathery hair across the eyes and the hand left his arm and the sharp fingers preened the hair into a silver ruff. 'Listen.' Then, quizzically: 'A new sound—the sound of silence.'

'Why, yes,' Kleinert said. 'The machines . . .' He stood without moving, staring into Schreiber's clever eyes. The sound of machines had left the gorge—like a tyranny risen and gone. Nothing moved; not the drills or the arm of Goliath or the skips on the cables or the lorries on the roads or any of the machines which worked in the body of the gorge. They were immersed in this sudden benison of peace and they would not break it, not with the voice or the feet, released, then, only by the sound of the true life of the gorge, the sound not intrusive but existing only on the edge of silence; the river and the wind and the cataracts, the clear wind susurrous in reeds, the river, the fingering wind, it all blended and sonorous in the ears and in the minds which had been possessed too long by the machines; a wind above a fall of water, this one blended sound the true sound of antiquity. 'You hear the falls?' Schreiber whispered. 'Listen well to them. After today the river will rise to cover them and no living ear will hear them again.' Kleinert nodded. No living ear; the reefs of rock silent for an eternity. It seemed ineffably sad. He looked at his wrist-watch. The small hand stood exactly on the hour, the hour at which the machines had been ordained to stop. It was so quiet he could hear its mechanism.

Languirand's yellow face came. 'If Monsieur Schreiber would——?'

'No,' Schreiber said. 'This is for you, Engineer. *Your* moment . . .'

Languirand nodded, as if the refusal was expected. He left them.

'Now,' Schreiber said to Kleinert. 'They will seal the tunnels one by one. Each tunnel will be sealed on the upstream side with stone from the tippers. Goliath himself will seal the last of the tunnels on the camp shore of the river. Later, the tunnels will be injected with concrete.' He smiled. 'You look worried, Jan.'

Kleinert stared again from the parapet to the river. This, he knew, was one of those moments of revelation in which the operation of immutable laws was unexpectedly demonstrated. It had a bearing

on faith. Death came to all things; everything moved to its predestined end. One had always known that. But one had not applied it to rivers, not to the great permanent forces of natural life. But here it was—a river actually about to die. The river was born: the river lived: the river would die. There would still be water from the mountains, in the reservoir; but the river as a living force would die. And if it happened to rivers . . . He looked upward at the sky. Perhaps this law of finality fell without exception on all things of matter; on suns and moons and seas, on this world beneath him. He felt suddenly insecure.

'Jan,' Schreiber said. 'The Engineer is about to signal.'

He saw Languirand climb on one of the raised ribs of concrete, the hand lift high above the head, pause, then wave vigorously with a yellow bandanna. He heard the diesels and he moved with Schreiber to the upstream edge where the tippers poised and already the ballast fell in arcs of enormous weight, into the river above the tunnels and the river swirling and the sand colour of the stone a stain on the whipped and eddied water and the waves spreading out in their slow concentric way to the shores. Languirand waved again, mopped his face with the bandanna and the dark-yellow of it was like a strip from the malarial skin.

'Now for Goliath,' Schreiber said. 'He will carry two hundred tons of stone and he will drop it with such precision . . . There, he is moving.'

'Yes,' Kleinert said. The crane was set high in the rising flank of the gorge so that it could reach and serve all heights of the dam-wall. He could hear its diesel. The limb swung and the chevroned shadow came with menace across the brown of the river, the shadow of the claw of stone on the water like the shape of a giant crab, and now the shadow on the high wall, scuttling, the giant crab now across their faces and the faces upturned and the limb above them and the claw with its immense burden earth-and-iron-red above them, then passing and the shadow gone and the sunlight reclaiming the flesh. He felt himself shrink from the contemplation of this awful power and he did not look, staring only at the back of Schreiber's head and hearing the deluge of stone and the cry of triumph that came from the shores and the parapet of the dam. 'Yes, of course,' he said weakly. It was right; inevitable that Goliath should choke life from the last artery of the river. They were shouting now, shaking hands with great effusiveness, muttering little phrases of prepared congratulation. The man, Zeffirelli, came, shook the hands of Languirand and Schreiber. Férol stood motionless in his idol's impas-

sivity and Schreiber called to him and the nut-dark Corsican face bowed slightly and the helmet flashed light.

'Come,' Schreiber said. He led Kleinert to the downstream wall, pointed. 'See?' The cascades had already lessened in force. The tunnels drained into small brown cauldrons and the shadow-crab came down the wall and entered the river as if it would utilise the last tide of water. The limb crossed to the shore but they did not look up, only at the tunnels and the flow of water, now slower, dark from the base of the tunnels then white with air, now the tunnels which the tippers had closed all drained and only the tunnel of Goliath still brown-wet with the dribble of its cavern. 'It is finished,' Schreiber said quietly.

Kleinert watched the river. It was falling and he could see where it ebbed from the shores, the reeds lengthening and new areas of the shores already bleaching in sun. The river was passing, leaving them desolate on this great concrete arch; passing. This was the true death of the river and the shores joined visibly as the last of the river went to the lake and the ocean, the bed below the dam coming like black primeval swamp, rough with the debris of the dam, and now there were only pools and rivulets already evaporating in sun and sending their foetid scents up the dam-wall and, distant, they could still see the breast of the river near to the mouth of the gorge, still agleam like all the rivers, still moving like all the rivers, moving placidly like all the rivers, but finally and with an unbearable sense of destination.

Kleinert turned away. He wanted to say something to Schreiber, something that might release this pain. But there were no words. Schreiber shook his head. Kleinert probed his ear. 'You did this,' he said. There was no real accusation. The guilt was too enormous, too universal, bred and seated in all of them. He felt the presence of something and he turned and the sling of Goliath was near to him smelling of earth and oil and cable, and he screamed with shock.

Schreiber's arm went around him and he turned from Goliath and the face had broken into lines of concern. 'It is nothing,' Schreiber reassured him. He reached out, touched the cradle on the sling. 'It is the custom. He has brought champagne. A celebration.' Zeffirelli's thick voice said in English: 'The pastor is unwell?' The Breton bent to the cradle, began to unload boxes of glasses and the buckets in which the champagne stood. The bottles were packed in ice and wet straw and the stalks of straw scattered in wind.

'It is the crane,' Schreiber explained. 'The crane has become—oppressive to him.'

Zeffirelli stared; at Kleinert, at the limb of the crane, at Kleinert.

Understanding came to the intelligent eyes. He nodded slowly and Kleinert saw the gleam of malice. He felt an unreasonable alarm. Zeffirelli held up one of the bottles. 'Champagne,' he said. 'A present from Goliath.' The voice mocked and Kleinert turned his face. 'You must drink,' the sardonic voice said. 'No man may offend Goliath.' Kleinert looked along the limb, this perspective of steel and metal sinew. He was afraid. It had come with stealth, soundlessly, up and through those reeling sun-white depths, nosed him like some monster coming from the sea. This was Goliath, this taint of oil and earth the giant's breath. He had never been so close. The crane did not move. There were two metal disks on the end of it like eyes. It is inspecting me, he thought insanely: there will be a tongue, perhaps the feel of antennae. The cradle swung in wind and he touched his sweating face and the limb moved away in its wide radial, away from the dam and the river-bed.

He took a glass of champagne from Schreiber's fingers, went to the lip of the parapet. He would accept Goliath's offering. The champagne was sour and warm and he sipped it, feeling its acidity on his teeth. He heard Schreiber say, in French and then in English: 'To the dam, to the relief, the power and the riches it will bring to this thirsty land.' He drank obediently. The river-bed was black and steaming and the stagnation came up the concrete cliff to his nostrils and the smell was the smell of the river's dying.

The plain had been emptied, that time of early manhood, when he and the others had shot against the tsetse. Now, secondly and finally, it lay denuded; by the drought, by the retreat of the sanctuaries and the killing which had followed, by the orgies of killing which came to the migratory herds in the free areas between the Reserve and the lake, by the drying of the lake by the river's death so that the immemorial game-trails led only to eroded land and the wide white salt-bowl which had been the lake. There was no game to lick the salt. Soon, the land would be watered from the reservoir behind the dam and the salt-bowl refill and the geometric webs on the maps of the irrigation-engineers become waterways across the plain and there would be fertility and fat harvests. But now the plain was empty and the game could never return; and even the nomads had gone (by decree) with their rib-sharp cattle and brown sheep and could never return. The plain was silent. A rhythm of life had been cut; when it was renewed with water and seed it would be another, different rhythm. Even the valley had been shot out by Quinn and the hunters and the camp had been surfeited with meat;

the Asians, men like Channa, had come from Okui and Mirembe and as far as Mababe, predatory on the fringes of the new lake that grew slowly in the valley behind the dam and there had been a great yield of hides, horn, ivory and trophies. Even timber from the sawn forests had been stolen.

Sloan had no duties at the dam or in its environs. When he came he came for Emma Kleinert, crossing the plain from Mirembe, not entering the camp or taking any of the roads that led to the dam, not going to the valley where the juniper trees died and the lake grew out across their graves, not coming for Jan and Mary Kleinert or Pitt and Kalulu in the Army camp; but for Emma, taking her, wholly, in brief interludes in the darkness of the paddock or in the stone defiles or in the scrub land that fell from the wadis to the papyrus, taking her because, in the wanting and the coming, there was a kind of oblivion, striving inside her for ecstasies so bright, so bursting in light that the shadows of the dam and the mutilated valley and the vanished beasts paled, even at rare and wincing times paling into nothingness, not palpable again until he lay cold within her, smaller, then apart and isolate from her and she feeling this withdrawal which was of the mind as well as of the sexual flesh and asking, timorously: 'What is it? What is it . . . ?' Or, on the brink of perception: 'What is it you want from me, Harry?' He did not speak to her of love or of futures or of the consequences of their love. He had no clear understanding of the word or what it meant or should mean, whether he loved her strongly or weakly, completely or partially. He told her in the breath-sweet-tongue-wet moments that he loved her, but this was a preliminary, something murmured because the tongue should say something, because her own endearments required answer, a part of the feeling and the moving and the opening and the entering. It was a word, formed in the curl of the tongue and going with the breath into her throat or the swell of her breast. If love for a woman was the wanting of solace and comfort and respite from pain and she alone could give it and keep giving it and hold him apart with her body, however briefly, from this shadow, and give it again and again so that the tension and the misery and the guilt of Haggard erupted inside her with his seed to leave him empty of those things, however briefly, then he loved her: loved her with strength and completeness and this was his woman and he could get no more than that from any woman.

Now, one month after the sealing of the dam and the death of the river, he had come by night to the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge. He

had not seen the site since the fight with Férol. He had avoided it because this was another exercise in discipline; like the discipline of not going to Port of Kuru for Paul Hassan. But it had grown daily within his mind: it towered now, a precipice that grew and had no end, filling the skies of the gorge. He had felt its dominance until it became insupportable; then he had learned from Jan Kleinert of the ceremony on the lip of the barrage and this strangling of the river had suddenly possessed him and he could see nothing but the dam and the emptying tunnels and the pitiable brown dribble to which the Suswa had been reduced and the evil toasting to the commission of a great sin. It was imperative that he see it.

He had come through the reed-marsh (now a wasteland of lifeless wands and no longer marsh) and through the wadis that led to the flank of the gorge across from the camp. He climbed. Everything was grey where the moon struck, the sky unstill with cloud, the rains near and, on the plain, the soil split and fissured for it. Time raced once more to a point at which rain would fall. The land waited and he could feel it in suspension. He climbed until the wind sharpened and stirred his hair, until he reached the outcrops that ran seven hundred feet above the ravine, ridged in a long *arête* to the head of the gorge. He followed the ridge and now the moon was in his face and the sky immense and the rain-cloud growing and wind coming across the gorge and into the face and the whole of it so imbued with motion it seemed he swayed insecurely with the revolution of the earth. He reached the summit of the ridge and darkness flooded the canyon and he saw that a triangular mass of cloud like a lateen sail crossed the moon, the sail rimmed silver, now beyond and away from the moon. He stared down.

The dam was white in the slant moon, its shadow thrown down and across the gorge so that its arch lay on this depth of shadow as if it were unsupported. For a moment he saw only its curve defined on blackness, very slender from that height, not built on thicknesses of concrete or anchored in the bedrock but poised, white and luminous; a thing of grace. It was set in the throat of the gorge like a piece of white alabaster. It was beautiful. It seemed that it had been fashioned by a single hand, then placed lightly with infinite care. There were no arcs in the gorge, only firmaments of amber light in the camp and the settlement, the red of neon in the Place des Anges. The river had mounted on the convex face of the dam but with no discernible movement; he could see its backflow in the entrance to the gorge, its torpor and its unmoving blackness beyond the reach of moon-glow and the surface-ripple of wind which returned the eye to the

alabaster brooch. Even the great abutments which integrated the dam in the body of the gorge and which would take the true thrust of the river in spate found symmetry in the basalt walls. He stared at this fusion of strength and beauty. The dam was beautiful in the night. Perhaps, in the glare of sun, with the debris of the dam around its base and the torn shores and the buildings which now lay unseen in shadow and the details of its concrete, the beauty would be marred. But now it had beauty and he could not deny this beauty.

Later, he returned along the ridge down to the wadis, passing through acrid walls to the bed of the river. He stood now in the mouth of the gorge on the downstream side of the dam; but there was no stream, no river, only this crust of the river bed which had been baked by a month of sun, this stench of mud and dead water and dead aquatic plants and rotting fish which was all that was left of the river. He walked along the bed. It was narrow here, completely in the shadow of the gorge. He walked with a sense of wonder. For how many millennia had the river flowed? No man had trodden this bed (which was the true bottom of the cleft) since the world formed and water came and rivers ran. He bent, dug with his fingers in the substance of the crust. There would be sand and silt and vegetal matter in it, the flesh and bone of fish and reptiles and vanished monsters in it, the basalt of the gorge in it and even the abraded skin of the distant mountains. This was the detritus of a great river, the slow distilling of life through time. He held it to his nostrils and he felt his own tissue move in response to its fertility. This was more than soil, more redolent of life than soil, life so elemental it was near to death. Now the vision of beauty of the crescent-dam under the moon had gone and there was only the sense of loss. They had taken the river and exposed that which should not be exposed and it had palpitated for a moment in the new experience of sunlight, then given up its ghost.

He began to walk again and the canyon widened and now wind brought the murmur of the camp. The flanks receded where the bed wound and he saw the dam and he went down the centre of the bed until he stood on the fringe of the shadow of the dam and looked up at it and it was enormous, so high that it encompassed all of the night, the valley and the sky. It was grey and dead and no moon struck the wall and he was puny under its immensity and he went forward into its shadow until even the moon was obscured and it had no line or grace or beauty: it was dead and even the shadow smelled of the deadness of concrete and it was nothing but concrete

on concrete on concrete and he was thankful that it was dead and that the vision of beauty had gone because, now, he could hate it, hate it for what it had done to the river and the game and for what it would do to the valley and the plain and everything he valued. He was empty of passion. Nothing could defeat this hugeness of concrete. The river would assail but never defeat. The high wall was immovable, a part of the gorge, and it was there for ever. He heard the diesel of the crane but he continued to stare upward at the concave wall and its six blind sluices high in the curve; the limb of the crane came but he did not look, hearing its diesel, then seeing its shadow above him on the greyness of the dam and the sling and its waving burden drawn in shadow on the wall and when he looked a man hung from the sling, very high now over the bed of the river, the limb moving on its radial and the man shouting so that the shouts struck the concrete and then the limb gone half-circle and the sling dipping to drop its burden between the legs of Goliath, distant from him on the rising gorge. There were many men there: he heard their derisive cries. Some drunken joke, he thought, conceived in the stupors of drink. He turned and looked upward at the sluices again. The wind came cold off the concrete and he shivered and the wall towered and it would be there for ever.

For ever.

Kalulu said: 'This is a very good bar.' They had been drinking heavily.

'Yes,' Pitt said. He mimicked the Algerian barman's voice: 'We have everything.'

'Even sawdust.'

Pitt nodded, stirred the sawdust with the toe of his boot. 'And it's a good name.'

'Bar Chancre?'

'Do you think there is a possibility? Of collecting a *chancre*?'

'Not if we stay on drink.'

Kalulu stared at the shapes of people shifting through hazes of tobacco-smoke. There were several mulattoes in bright, printed dresses. 'Couldn't we . . . ?'

'No.'

'I forgot,' Kalulu said. 'You are in love. With the lovely Emma.'

'Yes.'

'Really in love?'

'Yes.'

'Does she . . . ?'

'Look,' Pitt said unpleasantly. 'That's something you haven't learned. We don't talk about what our girls do.'

'Never?'

'No. Whatever the young men discuss in the shambas *we* don't discuss our women.' He saw the smile leave Kalulu's eyes. 'I'm only joking,' he said.

'No. It wasn't a joke.'

Pitt shrugged. 'All right. It wasn't a joke.' He fingered the lanyard that fell in a white loop from his shoulder. A State of Emergency had persisted since the riots and they could not enter the camp or the settlement except in modified battle-order. He touched the helmet on the counter and the canvas holster to the revolver. 'Ridiculous,' he said. 'In this heat . . .'

'And everyone so happy.'

'Why not? There's plenty of drink and crumpet, lots of money.'

'Listen,' Kalulu said. The juke-box had stopped and they heard the beat of drums in the African compound.

'You should go there,' Pitt said. 'You could put feathers in your beautiful black fuzz, paint your chest.' He pointed at the goat's-foot fetish on the wall. 'You could take that with you.'

Kalulu laughed. The laugh was of such depth that it caused people to turn. One of the mulattoes stared at him, oscillated her pink-mauve tongue between her lips.

'If you want a girl,' Pitt said, 'don't let *me* stop you.'

'I cannot afford it.'

'You don't have to. She likes you. She'll do it for nothing.'

'I doubt it.'

'I'll go and get her.'

Kalulu held his arm. 'You're very cross, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry I spoke about Emma.'

The juke-box began.

'It's no bloody good,' Pitt said. The beer was flat and he poured its remains into the sawdust. 'She wants Sloan.'

'Have some more beer.'

'No. No beer.'

The Algerian came. 'We have everything.'

'You have penicillin?'

'Penicillin?'

'Yes. We are going to have two beautiful negresses.'

'Please . . . ?'

'We will have two beautiful Scotch instead,' Kalulu said. 'English Scotch.'

The barman poured.

'He is a man,' Kalulu said. 'A real man, this Sloan.'

Pitt turned, his lips on the whisky. 'You trying to be rude?'

'No.'

'Yes, you are. You meant I'm not much of a man.'

Kalulu shook his head. 'I was talking of Harry Sloan.'

'And of me. By innuendo.'

'By what?'

'By innuendo.'

'That is a big word.'

'Yes,' Pitt agreed. 'It is a big word for a coal-black savage. It means an oblique reference.'

'I think we joke too much,' Kalulu said. 'The joking goes too far.'

'Sometimes.'

'I meant nothing at all—only that Sloan is a very big, very vigorous, very strong man; and that is the kind of man some women want.'

'It sounds like you, Lulu.'

Kalulu smiled. 'Sloan has a white body and a golden beard.'

'You black bastard,' Pitt said mildly. Then, seriously: 'He's having her, Lulu. She told me straight.'

'Is that important?'

'Yes.'

'You think it spoils a woman?'

'In a way.'

'Would you marry her?'

'Yes.'

'Even now?'

'Yes.'

Kalulu laughed and people turned. 'Good. You will marry her and have many ginger children.'

Men moved from the juke-box and it was blind and silent: they heard the drums, the wind veering to bring them close.

'Do they affect you?' Pitt asked.

'The drums?'

'Yes.'

'You are not joking now?'

'No.'

'They affect me. They do not make me want to dance or fight. But they bring—pictures.'

Pitt nodded. He drained his whisky and he saw Kalulu's face black and distorted through the glass bottom. The pictures would fall, with the drum-beats, into Kalulu's mind like sunlight falling suddenly into a glade; pictures of unease, of rituals and ceremonies and talismans and stone celts, gourds of blood and human organs, sacrifice.

'Pictures of ignorance,' Kalulu told him. 'Terrible, primitive ignorance.'

Pitt nodded again. Kalulu's eyes retreated and he knew that he had not revealed himself.

'Listen,' Kalulu said. The drums were louder. 'They heighten everything. They bring passion. You feel that they will stop—and something will happen.'

'Will they stop tonight?'

'Yes.'

'Tell me,' Pitt said. He felt slightly drunk. 'I never asked you——'

'What?'

'If, eventually, there was a war——'

'Between black and white?'

'Yes. How did you know I would ask that?'

'It is the question everyone asks,' Kalulu rubbed his stomach. 'Do you feel tight?'

'A little.'

'I don't think this is English Scotch.'

The Algerian heard. The sallow face pinched with temper. He brought the bottle. 'You see? Johnnie Walker.'

'That's very good,' Pitt said. The label looked old.

'More?'

'Yes.'

'Big ones?'

'Of course.'

The Algerian was mollified.

Kalulu picked up the bottle, stared at its contents. 'It is from the *pissoir*,' he said.

'No,' Pitt said. 'You have the wrong specie. It is from a camel. A camel called Johnnie Walker.'

The Algerian made a noise with his mouth. 'British,' he said, with contempt.

'It is definitely camel-piss.' Pitt gave him money, watched the thin dirty fingers shake in anger on the coins, search for change. 'Keep it,' he said generously.

'Ah . . .' The face relaxed.

'This camel . . .' Kalulu said. He drank the whisky.

The Algerian smiled. It was a good tip and it was all very funny. He attempted a joke. 'I piss only in the bottles of my enemies.'

'Like the Bible,' Pitt said gravely.

'I am definitely drunk,' Kalulu said. 'I ought not to drink this.' He drank it. 'What did you say?'

'Like the Bible. What he said. Yea, though I piss only in the bottles of mine enemies . . .'

Kalulu laughed. 'You sound like an archbishop.'

The Algerian left them.

Pitt asked: 'What about this war, Lulu?'

'The black and white war?'

'Yes.'

'I will tell you. Although I am drunk I will tell you, seriously.' The fingers touched the shoulders and the sewn pips. 'This is the loyalty, the true loyalty. You understand me?'

'Yep.'

The Algerian returned, joking: 'There are no camels in Staedtler's Gorge.'

'Let's get out of here,' Pitt said. He saw rapacity in the Algerian's eyes. 'Did I pay you?'

'No.'

'He paid you,' Kalulu said. 'Come.'

They left the bar, went through the wash of neon and into the square. There were now five thousand Africans and a thousand Europeans at the gorge and the Place des Anges had become a focus. It was full of people and there was a wind of heat and grit, like a wind that has crossed a desert, and it brought the sound of drums clearly. Pitt giggled, held on to Kalulu's arm. 'I'm as pissed as a coot.'

'You think that was hooch?'

'Yes. You see the old bottle? The tatty label?'

'Yes.'

'That was no bloody Johnnie Walker.'

'No.'

'That was hooch, all right.'

'Yes. Hooch.'

'The bastard.'

'Yes.'

'Should we go back and do him?'

'No,' Kalulu said.

'No, of course not. We are lieutenants.'

'Yes. Lieutenants.'

'Which Army are we in?'

'I forget.'

'It's the one with all the guns.'

'Yes, the one we like . . . ' They had reached the centre of the square.

'The bastard,' Pitt said. He could hear a familiar voice above the drums and the noise of the square; a high, fluting voice. 'Listen,' he said.

'It's Papa Kleinert.'

'Yes. It really is.'

'He's giving them the message.'

Kleinert stood, raised, in an angle of the square in the centre of a derisive group. The white linen jacket took colour from the rainbow light. They saw only the shoulders and the ugly face and the film of thin ginger hair and a declamatory hand and, nearing, the soft white onion of a nose which crinkled from the grimace of the moving lips. 'I don't understand,' Pitt said. A sense of foreboding penetrated his drunkenness. He had never known Kleinert in the role of public orator. Kleinert had always said, simply: 'I am a teacher. Whatever I have to give I will give to the minds of children; not the soap-box but the blackboard . . . ' He listened and the plaint of the voice came above the jeers, that absurd voice which had no music or dignity. Kleinert spoke carefully in English and then in Swahili: there were pauses in which he searched for an effective translation. ' . . . I am not a prude. Jesus was not a prude—he had infinite understanding of the weaknesses of men . . . knew that men are born with the seeds of evil, that each of us must destroy his own corrupt seed . . . ' A man tottered drunk on the fringe of the crowd, screamed: 'It is an evangelist!' then fell down. The drums beat and their rhythm seemed to quiver in the square. 'You hear that?' Kleinert cried. 'What evil passions will they loose tonight . . . ? I tell you, you build a new Gomorrah . . . here, above the dam. You could have had a bright and shining city . . . ' The hand pointed in the direction of the African settlement. 'That midden . . . depravity flowing like the filth of sewers . . . '

'There is something wrong,' Kalulu said. 'Should we——?'

'No,' Pitt said. 'Let him talk.' He hiccupped and his eyes flooded and the pastor's round head blurred and shook like a reddish coconut. The voice soared into a high tremolo . . . 'young men deprived of wives and tribal discipline . . . pockets of gold . . . turned inward on themselves . . . there, down there . . . the dark frescoes of perversion . . . '

The mob jeered. Most of them did not understand and the drums

in the rain-heavy night were more insistent and they saw only a ludicrous red creature baying to the moony sky and they would pass, soon, to the cards, the bottle, the feel of thigh and belly, sleep. Three negroes screamed in sudden laughter and Pitt saw their yellow stones of teeth, caught the carious breath. He felt sick and the beer and the hooch lay in his stomach like a small pond of acid. The voice fled again . . . 'I have been down there in the alleys of evil . . . it is there, manifested, living, growing . . . I have seen a man on a box behind a mule . . . men crazed with Indian hemp . . . I have seen the whore-houses and I have passed in *this cloth of mine* and I have seen the naked female breast held out to me like a yellow pear—'

'You stick around, padre,' an Australian voice said, 'and it won't be long 'fore you see the naked female bottom . . .'

Pitt giggled. He felt weakness enter his knees. Kalulu held him. The mob shouted with laughter and a man with a dust-streaked face stamped around the space in front of Kleinert, cradling in his hand an imaginary breast.

'Yes, you may laugh,' Kleinert cried. The voice cracked into an absurd falsetto. He brushed his brows in a distracted manner; as if this situation on the box in the fevered square was suddenly strange to him. 'But there is nothing funny in bestiality—'

'Nothing funny . . .' the crowd shouted.

'No, there is nothing funny,' Kleinert cried. 'An offence against God . . .'

A mulatto girl with a bright sash and sensuous hips screamed: 'You want a woman, padre?'

'Padre want woman,' the Australian voice called and the crowd began to stamp and chant: 'Padre want woman . . . padre want woman . . . padre want woman . . .'

Kleinert listened. The face was white and intense. The juke-box had started in Bar Chancre and by some trick of assonance the tribal drums beat in exact counterpoint to the modern dance and now the chanting voices and the stamping feet took up the rhythm of the drums and the music and it seemed to submerge Kleinert and the face lost form and purpose . . . 'padre want woman . . . padre want woman . . . padre want woman . . .' Kleinert reached down and behind him and when he straightened he held the shape of a small half-breed boy and the boy wore only a ragged vest and the small pink stalk was ajig between the thighs. Kleinert shouted: 'Is it right to peddle the bodies of children? Look at this child. Look well at him. Rouged and scented for the pleasure of some animal of the sewers. . . . ' . . . padre want woman . . . padre want woman . . .

padre want woman . . . 'You are filth!' Kleinert screamed. A man came, seized the boy and Kleinert held to him and the man pulled and the boy laughed, saying in a piping voice: 'Padre want woman . . . padre want woman . . .' The man went with the boy. Kleinert held up a coin so that it winked in light. 'This is *your* God: and that, up there . . .' He pointed to the still girders of the crane, cut on the face of the moon. 'That idol, that metal image of God—Goliath . . .' He continued to point, dramatically, and the eyes of the audience followed the finger and they raised their arms and pointed in mimicry and they began to chant: 'Goliath . . . Goliath . . . Goliath . . .' A man in a red shirt with black, widow's-peaked hair climbed on to the box, put his arm around Kleinert's shoulders. 'Zeffirelli,' someone murmured behind Pitt. Zeffirelli spread his arms like a practised orator, began to speak in rapid French and now there was no chanting, only the stamp of feet. Zeffirelli stopped speaking, laughed and showed his white teeth and the crowd cheered and took up the chant again: 'Goliath . . . Goliath . . . Goliath . . .' They moved inward on Kleinert and Pitt saw the linen jacket flutter like a falling handkerchief in the centre of the vividness of shirts and dresses and suddenly Kleinert was on their shoulders, horizontal and the onion nose tipped up to the moon, borne, and everyone moving and the voice behind Pitt saying: 'They are going to give him a ride on Goliath.'

The drums had stopped.

'Let's go,' Pitt said. 'Quick.' He felt suddenly nauseated and he bent, controlled the spasm. A corporal of military police stood there when he straightened; a man with a bleak face and pale, alert eyes which watched him carefully.

The corporal said: 'Are you all right, sir?'

'Yes.'

'I don't think so, sir.'

'He'll be all right, corporal,' Kalulu said.

'Get out of it,' Pitt said. 'We have to hurry. They're putting that old man on the crane. We have to stop it.' He hiccupped and bile came into his mouth. He spat.

'Don't be in a hurry, sir,' the corporal said. The voice was courteous, the eyes cold. Pitt knew that the courtesy meant nothing. 'I'm all right,' he said. The crowd was moving out of the square and he could not even see Kleinert's ginger head. Temper rose. 'Get out of my way,' he said. 'Get the hell out of it.'

'You're not wearing your helmet, sir,' the polite voice said. 'And I think you're drunk.'

'Look, corporal,' Kalulu said. 'We've had a load of hooch. We don't deny it. But we're all right now.'

'I've been watching you,' the corporal said. 'And I'm watching you now. And I don't agree.'

Pitt said: 'Okay. We're drunk. Drunk as lords. But that don't matter, see? There's an old preacher down there an' they're putting him on the crane.' He felt the corporal's hand on his arm.

The man said softly: 'I don't like laying hands on an officer.'

'Like hell you don't,' Pitt said. 'You damn liar.'

'Put your helmet on, sir.'

'Put it on, Alan,' Kalulu said.

Pitt fitted the helmet. He felt like crying and he knew he was about to eject the pond of acid. 'That poor old man . . .' he said. He went into shadow, puked. Then he went back to Kalulu and the corporal and another military policeman who had come and he had begun to shiver and the crowd had gone.

'That's better,' the corporal said. 'Now just take a few deep breaths, wipe your face, tidy up a bit . . .'

Pitt obeyed.

'That's better.' The cold eyes studied him. Then, to Kalulu: 'Can I leave this gentleman (he accented the word) in your care, sir?'

'Yes.'

'I could get you a lift to the camp.'

'No. We'll walk.'

The corporal nodded. He said doubtfully: 'Take it nice and easy.'

'We will, corporal. Nice and easy.'

When they reached the crane the space between its legs and the buildings it straddled was tight with people. The diesel beat downward in pulses of noise and the great limb was already far out over the gorge and they could see Kleinert's body waving, twisting on the end of the sling and the shadow of him frantic on the concrete wall and they heard his voice losing in the depths of the gorge then striking the wall, coming to them in high wails of terror.

SLOAN SPENT THE NEXT five days disbanding the scout posts on the Yuki Stream, taking the equipment and the provisions from each

of them, these the last remaining posts, storing in the Land Rover and, then, abandoning the wooden huts to the worm and the weather. Except that this was part of the dissolution of the sanctuaries they had been good days, lived in the wilderness with only the scout, Jeru; but no clarity of thought or decision had come with the wind off the Stream. He had gone nightly to the Stream, this river which fed the Suswa and whose waters would lie trapped, soon, against the dam, alone, staring down the stem of his pipe at the languid water and the rain-cloud mirrored on it but nothing had resolved, nothing came to still his conflict.

He returned to Mirembe, deposited the material gleaned from the posts and, in the afternoon of the sixth day, took the access road to Staedtler's Gorge.

There was much heavy traffic on the road and diesel-fume hung on the humidity. Lower, on the steppe to the west of the road, they were building the pylons that would carry the current and the high steel needles were sharp on the sky as far as he could see. To the east of the road were the encampments of the gangs who were bringing the railway from Mirembe. There was no game on the plain and it was brown from drought. For the last five miles he drove behind a transporter carrying an immense turbine which would go to the subterranean power-house on the flank of the dam. The sun was low when he reached the gorge and he took the truck to the mission-school. He had not come for Emma: later, perhaps, she would give him the comfort of her body but now, at this crisis of his life, no woman could give him that which he needed. He saw her in the paddock, tall and linen-white in the strings of blind and ailing children and the sun red in the hair that escaped her cap, saw or sensed, for a moment, that aura of compassion that surrounded her when she worked with children; but he did not stop or hail her and he went direct to the mission-house.

The sun dipped when he entered and the light began to leave the bared walls and blue shadow came almost immediately to the bungalow. He went to the kitchen but there was no sign of Mary Kleinert and he walked through the silent house and it had the feel of bereavement and he stopped, listened to the silence and the patter of insects which did not break it but only accented it; the light was going and he could not see the dust-motes. He went to Kleinert's study, the small unpainted room which looked through sun-blinds to the hills of the gorge, and the room had this same feel of emptiness, of something gone. Kleinert's tall-backed chair with the ragged wings faced the window and he saw only the back of the

chair and the crown of the head an inch above its top, the head faintly lacquered with pale-red from the last distillation of sunlight. He remained by the door and the light withdrew at that moment, no dancing coins or lances from the blinds and the angles taking a purple bloom. It seemed that Kleinert slept but, then, he saw that the fingers rapped lightly on the knee. 'It's Harry,' he said.

Kleinert did not turn.

'Listen, Jan,' Sloan said gently. 'Just sit there and listen. I don't often do this and it'll be easier if I don't have to see the surprise on old Gingerbread's face. But I have to talk, someone has to hear me, someone has to tell me . . .' He hesitated and the small freckled fingers continued to tap. 'I know I haven't given much to you and Mary. I've loved you both, respected you, and I've tried in my own way to repay you but I know I haven't given you the *exact* thing you wanted. We shared a lot in the past and we loved the same things—the plants, the game, the plain before they butchered it—but I never saw God in these things the way you did. If I saw God it was a god of nature, not concerned with good and evil: it gave one beauty and one was thankful for that. I suppose I'm really a pagan, a kind of sun-worshipper, looking no further, no deeper than light as the source of life . . .' He smiled at the still crown, now in part shadow. 'I wish I could believe, simply, like you and Mary. Truly I wish I had a God to fall back on because, you know, you can't get much comfort out of a sunbeam or a branch or a pool in a rock, you can't pray to a landscape or the smell of a river on wind. Don't you see, Jan, a man responds to his Creator in his own way? A church for some of us is no better than a forest, an altar shining under a bit of stained glass no better than a tree in sunlight. But these things don't help a man in trouble. And if he's got no proper god, no one to hear a prayer . . . Well, that's why I'm here, Jan. I don't know what to do. My world, the world *I* want, is falling to pieces. I'm in the middle of it and I need a particular kind of world to live in and I can't change. You understand that, Jan? *I can't change*. I don't know what to do or where to go, who to fight. I'm a man in a corner. All I can do is get my hands on someone, on something, and I know it's wrong and I know that violence won't solve it . . .' He paused. The finger had stilled. The head did not move. The house was unliving, like a place with sheeted furniture. He went to the chair and looked down at Kleinert. A little light came from the bloodshot rim of the sky and it came, filtered, through the plastic blinds, and Kleinert's face was vacant, flaccid as if all control had left it. The eyes stared at the blind and to somewhere beyond it;

remote. The chin gleamed with saliva. 'Jan,' he whispered. 'Old Gingerbread . . .' He heard sound and he saw that Mary Kleinert stood in the doorway.

'What has happened?' he asked. He touched Kleinert's cheek. 'A stroke?'

'No.'

He shook Kleinert's shoulder and the head went backward and forward and the eyelids fell and opened and fell and opened like the mechanical eyes of a doll. 'Jan,' he said. 'It's Harry. Harry . . .'

'Leave him,' Mary Kleinert said.

He went to her, put his arm around her.

'It was the dam,' she told him. 'They tied him on the end of the crane and swung him over the gorge.'

'Yes,' he said, remembering. 'I saw a man . . .' He heard the cries again. 'My God,' he said. 'It was Jan.'

She began to weep and he kissed her hair.

'I heard you,' she said catarrhally. 'I heard what you said to him.'

He touched her cheek. It was cold. It had the same texture of deadness that enveloped the bungalow. When she spoke again the voice was reverent; as if it was Kleinert's corpse that sat propped in the chair.

'I'm sorry he was not here to help you.'

He cut the zinnias from Kleinert's bed, without temper and carefully above the leaf-joints, tied them into a pleasant, short-stemmed posy, placed the posy on the seat of the Land Rover. Mary Kleinert watched him miserably, saying in the pious and death-hushed voice, only: 'He would not have wished you to do this.' Sloan got into the truck, switched on the ignition. He told her: 'It is all ending now. But there are a few things to do. A few things . . .' He drove into the twilight and he saw, in his driving-mirror, the shape of an Army truck which he guessed to be Pitt's. It stopped on the space his own truck had occupied and, as the road wound and the hill cut the view, he saw two men climb from it. Now that the road had turned and the dam had grown high the crescent was visible from any part of the road and he watched its sweep and felt its dominance. Insect-figures walked on the summit of the arch. Soon, he thought, they will open it ceremonially, press a few symbolic gallons of river-water through the sluices; there will be no reference to the cemeteries of the valley, the gorge and the plain. He drove to the crane, left the truck in the shadow of an earth-scoop and went with the posy to the company office.

The man with the scaly scalp sat under the same unshaded globe, apparently reading the same grease-stained *Paris-Soir*. He recognised Sloan. 'Ah, it is the Custodian of the Animals.' This was an established camp-joke. Then: 'They are beautiful flowers. Are they for me?'

'They are for Férol.'

The man nodded. He seemed to understand immediately. He lifted a telephone.

'I will be under Goliath,' Sloan said.

When Pitt and Kalulu reached the crane the arcs shone down and across the arena between its legs: a great crowd had gathered and men hung on the superstructure and streams of animated men and women converged so that it had the sick but festive feel of a prize-fight. Pitt brought the truck to the fringe and they climbed on to its hoops and the smell and the anticipation of the rustling crowd came up to them, the pomade and the calico and the oil of the sleek mulatto-heads, coming with the acid scent of the boiling water in the radiator and the deep earthy smell which was of, and particular to, every amphitheatre in which men match themselves. Sloan was there, stripped down and the flowers in his hands and the body strong and comely in the glow of the arcs; alone. Pitt waved but the face showed no sign of recognition and, as he dropped his hand, the crowd parted and Férol came, helmeted and attended, the torso naked, sinewed and hard as if had been broken into shape from veinstone; hided not fleshed; the trousers belted low on the belly and the big shell of the navel sunk in this corrugated hide-stone, the bandanna knotted at the nape under the helmet and the rabbit-ears of the knot alert and quivering on the neck and, then, the helmet and the bandanna off with a slow and ceremonious movement and the hair a cropped and grey-blue lawn and the eyes deep and malefic like an idol's; and the power, this absolute, granite power, exuded like a primal scent. The man, Zeffirelli, had brought mattocks and Pitt heard them ring, saw their chisel-edges glint as if they had been rasped for sharpness. Férol raised his hand and the men left him solitary in the arena. He did not look at Sloan but the head turned and the eyes, so deep that the stare was suggested, not seen, looked at the sky to where the reflection of the Bar Chancre neon hung like a bloodstone. He waited, the mattocks at his feet; waited for Sloan to come to him with the zinnias, as if this insult of flowers had now been ritualised.

Sloan crossed the space. They heard his feet. Now that the barrage

was complete no machines worked after sundown in the gorge. The arm of Goliath was still, very high above them, and the cable swinging slightly in the wind and the shadow of the cable exaggerated, thick as a column on the ground. They could not even hear the juke-box in the bar; only the palpitation of excitement which was like a sound and leapt and died like a sound; the sound of Sloan's footsteps. Sloan pushed the posy into Férol's belt and Férol stared down at it, then withdrew it gently with the care of a woman taking flowers from a vase. He did not tear the posy or throw it to the ground or treat it with contempt. He went to the edge of the ring, gave it to a negress in a white dress and the woman set it in her own belt where the flowers gleamed in the arcs, red-purple against the whiteness. Kalulu whispered: 'He must like flowers': but Pitt did not smile. Férol returned to Sloan, bent, picked up the mattocks and Sloan wrenched them from his grasp, flung them behind him. The crowd screamed and Sloan hit Férol very hard in the body and the Camp-Master sat down.

Zeffirelli came into the ring, retrieved the mattocks. Férol got up. Zeffirelli held out the mattocks, shook them petulantly as if he were shocked at the infringement. Sloan hit him and the Breton fell, the shafts of the mattocks crossed on his chest. The ring dissolved and many men came forward and now there were only the naked shoulders of Sloan and Férol and a forest of gesticulating arms. Then the men went back and the ring reformed and they saw that they had grappled, the arms locked and the tawny flesh pale on the hide which was darkly violet in the arcs and the grey-napped head no higher than Sloan's beard and the neck beneath it short and bossed with muscle and the bodies locked and moving in their slow pirouette and the crowd quiet now and the breathing deep and tremulous on the quiet and Férol's power set now like a dark leech on Sloan's body and still the tight circle of unrelenting effort and the faces caught in camcos of strain, ja-v-rigid, the flesh so fused it seemed it would not part and muscle spread on muscle and the sweat blending and Férol's veined, obsidian body ashine like bottle-glass with it and still the circling, balanced then unbalanced then balanced again and the breathing rapid and expelled in little puffs of effort and the grey head in the fair beard and the boots four and inseparable and scuffing the earth into black scores and this effort so intense it was one self-destructive muscle bent inward on itself and failing, then, so that the men stepped apart.

The crowd cried out with the release of tension.

'My God,' Pitt said. 'Oh, my God.' This pitting of strength had

frightened him. He had seen savagery uncovered there in that light-blued arena, something that offended him like the poison-trees.

He saw it now through a web of humidity, the air thick and the sky smoking with rain-cloud beyond the arcs and the heat imprisoned low to the ground, the men moving through this thickness of air and heat and the rain poised and the blows slow and indolent as if they swung against a density of liquid, the blows coming with a kind of majesty, delivered and received without feint or shift, not slipped or avoided but taken on braced bone and muscle; this a true trial of strength, not artifice, and the blows heard on the silence, felt, flinchingly, by every man and woman, innumerable, the blows slower now and the blood black like dirt from the tunnels of the noses and the chins black from it and the fists and forearms black-wet and still the blows, very slow, and the flecce of hair on Férol's chest stuck with sweat and blood so that it ran like a thin black mane from throat to navel and each blow swung now from a haze of effort and the strength sapped and diminishing and the feet like dragged weights turning on the shadow of Goliath's cable and the arms not flexible but each blow discernible in its slow arc and, suddenly, the men apart, arms loose at the hips and the eyes, well-deep, peering from the veils of exhaustion.

The phase passed, the phase of the grapple and the fist and without advantage to either, Férol came from this respite of exhaustion and put his boot carefully into Sloan's left kneecap. They heard its impact, Sloan's cry of pain lost in the cry of the crowd, Férol crouching, the arms loose and ape-swinging and the face terrible in the wan light of the dipping arc and the blood from the nostrils congealed and hung through the moustache like two black thongs from the nose to the chin and now the weight shifting expertly from leg to leg and each released boot thrust, swung and hooked, the boots plied like tools of breakage, and the toe, heel and sole solid on Sloan's lower legs and now Sloan limping and the leg-bones cut and bloody and his height reduced from the limping and the crowd chanting in a delirium of victory: 'Férol . . . Férol . . . Férol . . .' and Pitt screaming: 'You dirty frog bastard . . . !' and Sloan's pain drawn on the face and in the curving of the body and Kalulu whispering: 'Férol *has* to win, don't you see? He *has* to win.' And Pitt whispering: 'I want Harry to win. I want him to win, Lulu. Win, win, win. He's got to win . . .' he told himself, sweating

and lip-sticky: I don't care what he's done, taken my girl, screwed my girl, what he did in the valley . . . But I want him to win . . . Harry, Harry, Harry . . . The chant broke across him as if in derisive answer: Férol . . . Férol . . . Férol . . . The boots were pistons, above the knees now, precise in the thighs and Sloan short from the bending pain and the boot twice in the groin and then, suddenly, Sloan's hands on Férol's boot and the hands grasped and Férol held immobile and the short column of a leg extended and parallel to the ground and, then, the whip of Sloan's arms and Férol twisting and the veinstone body prone on the ground and the crowd silent and the accent of victory dead in the throat and Pitt's scream on the silence: 'Finish him! Finish him!' but Sloan not advancing, the delayed pain coming now into the genitals and the body bending to it and Férol on his knees, rising, and still the hands on the flooding pain and Férol staring at the contorted body of this golden man, rising, and Sloan still rigid in his cast of pain and Férol upright now, leg-dragging and the impassivity gone and the face fearful and, then, the rain, the first spit of rain, tepid on the flesh, the separate spits of rain and the bellying sky and the needles of rain tasting of earth and the grit of the wind and then the rods of rain flung by wind like scarves across the channels of the arcs and the rain scouring and Sloan and Férol aware of rain, tongue-licking in rain, and the scabs of blood parted from the flesh, dissolved by rain and this dilution running like blood and the soil steaming and the first charge of lightning white-brilliant across the now-dulled arcs and the crippled men momentarily white and unmoving like statuary in the lightning and the rain.

Férol came through the rain and now the hands were outstretched, the leg dragging and the fingers closed but the thumbs standing from the fists curved and rigid like dark metal hooks, seeking, seeking Sloan's eyes, revolving in slow circles, seeking, the hooks wicked in the black rain, then darting for the gouge and Sloan's face moving, retreating before the hooks and everything black with rain, the shirts and the dresses black and saturating and the hair of the mulattoes in dripping tassels and the metal of the crane black and Férol's dragging boot black with mud, square like a clod, and the crowd very quiet because the intent to blind touched it in deep places of fear and the lightning coming in intermittent charges and the flesh of the women like wet porcelain in it and Férol's arm-out, hand-hook shadow grotesque where it was thrown by lightning or the arcs. Pitt screamed in the silence: 'Hit him, Harry! Hit him!'

And Sloan ducked under the hooking thumbs, hit Férol with such force that the fist seemed to penetrate the midriff. They heard Férol cry and the breath leave him in a long exhalation and the hands fell and there were no hooks and Sloan hit him again and now Férol was in the mud, turning slowly on his hip. Sloan picked him up, stood him in front of the leg of Goliath, unmoving like a monolith in rain, hit him so that the body went backward into the metalwork of the leg, not falling, and Sloan hit the face again with such impact that the head went down into a vee of the metal structure where it was held at the ears as in a frame and he hit it again and the crowd shouted and the head went lower and he hit it again and the crowd shouted and the head went lower and he hit it again and again and the head went lower and lower until he felt it wedge immovably and when he stood back, mouth open to the sheeting rain, Férol lay held and unconscious, the body in curvature away from the ground, the arms hanging and the face upturned to rain, pallid, the moustache like a wet black leaf.

Pitt saw Sloan step away, stare tiredly at the arcs and the rain and the crowd. It was silent and, then, he felt something incandescent, a kind of heat leap through it. A few men came forward, stared down at Férol's body. An arc dipped to illuminate the scene and the body was grey and luminous in the glare and they could see the diaphragm rise and fall and the rain glistening on this rise and fall and the sight of the body wedged in the steel was so bizarre that the leap of heat became a frenzy, engendered, and a drum beat in the compounds and Zeffirelli ran into the arena, screamed something into the rain like a man raising his voice in lamentation, and men surged forward in the rain and Pitt saw them swarm like a pack, bring Sloan down, submerge him. 'For Christ!' he shouted. He leaped from the hoops, stumbled once, felt Kalulu lift him and then they were in the massed and moving bodies and their odours of wet cloth and wet flesh, in the frenzy, parting, thrusting until they were there with the men bent in rain over Sloan: they saw the gleam of knife-steel. Pitt drew his revolver, flicked the safety, fired into the sky and the report seemed to break the links of frenzy and Zeffirelli held his arm and said, with spite: 'See? We have not hurt him.' The face broke up and he began to cry. 'Férol is beaten.'

The men stood back and the crowd was absolutely silent and even the drum had stopped and there was only the beat of rain and Sloan getting to his feet, alone in the arena, and the arc moving with its sense of theatre from Férol's faintly-pulsing body to Sloan and his loneliness. He turned slowly in the slowness of exhaustion and the

face came into the arc and Pitt saw that the beard had been cut from one half of the face.

3

THERE WERE STILL a few things to do. It was the end of something and he could not avoid it and it had begun when he had seen the aerial-survey 'plane at the mouth of Staedtler's Gorge. Or it had begun when Malcolm Sloan brought him to the plateau of Mirembe and they had seen the redness below the prickly mimosa. You could not always see the beginnings of ends and perhaps it had really begun in another, earlier century when men had seen the plain and felt its silence and gauged its fertility and, then, crossing the plain to the gorge, had marked the river's power and, because *they* could never leave anything alone and really feared the wild and therefore hated it and because *they* had never learned that a country was formed as a country, perfectly, and that whatever you did to it only diminished it, had bent their urban minds to the taking of its strength; its destruction. He had been born in the middle of a process and, looking at it now, in retrospect, he saw that none of the things he had done or refrained from doing (all the awakening, the submitting to, the loving and respecting of the country) had had the power to prevent or even delay its destruction. *They* had the power; and it was always exercised like that, anonymously, the faces in shadow and never in sun, and you could never reach them, never fight them except with your own inward-turning hate and, even if reached and destroyed, would ultimately reproduce themselves faster than those who had this love and respect for the wild. You could only retreat, search for the last wilderness, the last silence.

But there were still a few things to do.

Now, entrained for Port of Kuru and sitting left-face to the window so that they should not see his mutilated beard, he watched the plantations of banana and mango and guava and, then, the plantations gone and the stockless regions which were still full of fly and, then, the areca-palm of the littoral and the air of the coast brittle and sea-reflected and now the corrugated-iron of the quarters of the poor, the line winding and the train slowing, the insulating parks and then the bungalows and flower-gardens of the Adminis-

tration and the Asian merchants. He was in Port of Kuru and it was one of the things that had to be done.

He had done several things, already. He had gone, in the course of the remaining duties, to the scout-post which lay twenty-five miles to the south of the dam under the escarpment and where, surprisingly, there were still a few pockets of game, mainly antelope, and some good forest-land. There, accompanied by Athumani, he had dismantled the post and stored its contents. There had been a pack of wild-dog, living on the last of the antelope, which had behaved in a strange and unnatural manner and he had watched it and, suspicious of it, had shot two of the pack and put them, with the equipment and the stores, into the truck. Then he had joined the dirt road, not yet mired by rain, and returned to Mirembe. He had delivered the carcasses of the dogs to Forde at the vet. station and the contents of the truck to Game Headquarters. Freeland had gone to Mababe to arrange the closure of Mirembe and he had written his resignation (not caring about the contractual aspect and knowing they would be eager to accept it) and had left it on Freeland's desk. There would be seven more days and these, the first and second of them, would be occupied with Port of Kuru.

The main street of Port of Kuru ran parallel and adjacent to Government Road. All roads ran down to the harbour and there were always the masts of dhows and the colour of ocean at the ends of the roads. He passed the bonded-ivory sheds and then the Police Headquarters, pausing to stare at its high cement steps. Haggard's sharp knees would have come down these steps, lifting bone-white in sunlight: or, perhaps, one of those windows in the barracks would have framed the thin face. He went through an alley into Government Road and there were no government buildings or official places of any kind; it was a road of Asian trade with the faint curry-smell of India. The gutters had been swilled, recently, with water and the water steamed in sun. He asked in one of the grain-and-spice warehouses for Paul Hassan and the man, a merchant with a cataracted eye, stared at him through this film of blueness, the other eye brown, and indicated a warehouse, across and lower, fronted by a timber shop with a central, grilled door.

'Is this the only Paul Hassan?' Sloan asked.

The unfilmed eye stared at the irregularity of the beard.

'I mean,' Sloan said carefully, 'that it is a common name. Is there more than one Paul Hassan in Government Road?'

The man shook his head. He was intrigued by the beard.

Sloan crossed the road. The shop was brown with gloom, partly

shuttered; there were curios, weapons, ornaments and bales of cloth. The door was of teak and a board was screwed below the grille. It looked very old and its lettering was archaic and it seemed to have no connection with the present.

PAUL HASSAN

INDIAN KASHMERE MERCHANT

Established 1891

Indian, Chinese, Japanese Silks & Silver Ornaments
Embroideries of Sindh, China, Japan and Hand-Made
Lace Works of Malta, Teneriffe etc.
Old Turkish & Arabian Utensils, Moradabad Brassware
Bombay, Surat & Chinese Ivory, and Sandalwood
Engraved and Painted Boxes & Toys
African Curiosities

He opened the door, went in.

Freeland asked, with curiosity: 'Where will you go, Sloan? What will you do?'

'I don't know.'

'There's nothing for you here.'

'No.'

'A few patches for the tourists—that wouldn't suit a man like you.'

'No.'

'Difficult, isn't it?' The eyes were malicious.

Sloan shrugged. 'It's a big country.'

'I'm glad you're going. I won't disguise it. You've been an embarrassment to me.' An air of temper touched him. 'Just look at you—that absurd half of a beard. Any *normal* man would have shaved it off.' The ruby winked with the sudden agitation of his hand. 'But not you. Oh, no. You have to parade your humiliation . . .' He picked up a sheet of paper. 'Have you seen this?'

'No.'

'It's a report from Forde on the dogs you brought in. It's been here at least a day.' The suavity in the voice gave way to anger. 'Where the hell have you been, Sloan?'

'What does it say?'

'It says he got positive brains from both the dogs. Rabies.' Freeland gave him the paper. 'Here. Read it.'

Sloan read it.

'You should've destroyed them,' Freeland said accusingly.

'They made off.'

'How many?'

'A dozen, perhaps fifteen.'

'You should've shot them.'

'They won't go far. They'll stick with the antelope.'

Freeland shook his head. 'But if they're rabid they're unpredictable. If they run up that scarp to the settled land they could be dangerous.'

'They'll stick.'

'Let's hope so. But you get down there, Sloan. You know exactly where they are. You take a scout and torches and shotguns and don't you come back until that pack's destroyed. Is that clear?'

'Yes.'

'Go now.'

He went to the door. The cabinets and the punched-card system had already gone to Mababe: the office looked bare. Even the coloured charts had gone. Soon, they would send the library and the herbarium.

Freeland said: 'What about the girl, Sloan?'

'Girl?'

'Kleinert's daughter.'

'What about her?'

'She's a nice girl.'

'Yes.'

'How old? About twenty? Twenty-two?'

'About that.'

Freeland stared. 'She's too young for you.'

'Maybe.'

'You can't drag a girl like that behind you.'

'No?'

'A girl like that can't live in bush.'

He closed the door against Freeland's querulous face and the smooth voice was saying: 'A man needs money—even in bush. Even a man like you . . .' He went out into the sun to search for Jeru or Athumani. He would do this job, this last job of the rabid dogs.

He glassed the plain and the rising scarp. There was no sign of the dogs. It was noonday and the rains had not yet begun to come with regularity or to fall with violence and the terrain was very hot, humid and still dry. They had searched for the whole of that morn-

ing and the plain and the scrub around the forest-land was empty of everything except the antelope which grazed right up to the edge of the forest. The forest grew from where the escarpment rose and it went with the rising ground up to the first of the shoulders to run, unbroken, in a ragged epaulette. They searched diligently for the pack, for a sight or track of the big-eared, scavenger-headed dogs; but there was nothing. He hated the hunting-dogs. They had no courage except in the pack and, even then, they would run sometimes at the throwing of a stone. But they would be here, he decided: their guts would tell them to stay with the antelope even if the brains were gone. They were nocturnal, not invariably but usually; the pack was lying up, somewhere in the brush or the fringe of trees and, soon, when the heat began to die, it would emerge. But it's a big plain, he thought, with anxiety: a small, fast pack loose in all this vastness. Freeland was right. They were unpredictable: their disintegrating brains might take them anywhere. He should have kept with them when he had seen their mad, circling, rail-chasing, hind-quarter-biting behaviour. He glassed the plain and the scrub again, saying to Athumani and without lowering the glasses: 'You get the chop-box. We'll put the truck in shade and lie up for a bit.' The anxiety was there, seated, and it would remain until he found the dogs.

After they had eaten under the shade-trees he took the truck slowly along the fringe of the forest, the ground resilient but not yet soft, stopping the truck at every point of vantage and using the glass. Then he drove up the scarp between the trees, along and up the swath of brush, stump and sapling which was the old fire-break, still stopping when a view presented itself, glassing the immediate cover and, when he could see it, the plain. He saw the herds but they were not attended and this, he knew, was now the only hope; that the instinct of the pack would keep it, in this empty and almost meatless steppe, near to the game. He turned the truck when the ground became rough, brought it down, very slowly and still stopping and bringing the glass in slow arcs across the hazes of heat, until the scarp levelled. Nothing moved except bird and antelope and rain-cloud and, then, the rain came and he took the truck back to higher ground where it would not get bogged and watched the plain opening to the rain and already there were olive streaks of succulence in the brownness of the drought.

When the rain was stopped he drove in the direction of the dirt-road. The antelope had moved further out into the plain and the

ground was very soft and he drove, out, in a wide circle to escape the softness and it was here that he found the bodies of two of the dogs and some droppings of the pack. The bodies were warm, flea-moving and rain-wet, the jaws and the beards under the jaws still viscous with saliva. They were recently dead but they were alike only in their deadness. One of them was spotted and it had a pretty white dappling on the haunches: the other drab and faintly brindled. Soon, he thought, they will be eaten by jackal and the jackal become rabid and then . . . He turned away from the contemplation of this cycle of disease and death and, in that moment, he saw the pack come from cover, stream like beagles across the plain, enter the scrub, break cover again, wheel erratically and make for the dirt road. He gave them the shotgun but with no noticeable effect and now he could not see them behind the scrub, hearing them call, this call which always had unease, the call again, this call which was never the voice of a dog.

He reached the dirt road and the rain began again and already he could feel the wheels slip but he would not stop now for the precaution of fixing chains. He drove slowly on the centre, the road running under the forest of the lower scarp and the rainstorm intense, the windshield blurred and the plain fleeced in white rising mist behind the blurring. The dogs had gone. He drove until the rain stopped and sun yellowed the plain and the road cleared. Ahead, he saw the truck. A man leaned against the wing; a big, misshapen man with a hairless scalp that gleamed in sun, redly like an apple. It was Davey Leese.

He stopped, 'got out of the Land Rover. He gave the glasses to Athumani. 'Keep looking,' he said. Leese did not move or acknowledge him. The fingers scratched lethargically on the bones of the scalp, feeling their prominence. Sloan saw the weals on the palm. There was a faint smell of uncleanness about him. He looked defeated.

Sloan said: 'What's up, Davey?'

Leese blinked at him and he felt an immediate disquiet: one seemed to stare, perpetually, into mad faces. The pale eyes became intent, returning the stare, and he put his hand to his face, his own half-bearded face, knowing, suddenly and fearfully, that he had moved near to Leese's world, that this absurdity of the mutilated beard, the impulse which had taken him to Port of Kuru and the thing he had done to Paul Hassan had brought him to the threshold of it; that Leese stared at him from this other region and, in the staring, recognised him. He looked away from Leese, at the plain

and its miasmas of mist and pools of lemon sun; this clean, sane, unhuman world which was like a refuge. He said savagely: 'You damn sun-crazy loon!' Light flooded the plain.

Leese nodded. He struggled for words, words formed with difficulty in the depths of his own long silences. 'He got my jumbo,' he said, with pain.

Sloan went to the Land Rover, to Athumani. 'See anything?'

'No.'

'Keep looking.' He found the whisky-flask in the dash, went back to Leese, gave it to him. The throat, a loose and spotted old-man's throat, rippled with the swallowing.

'Where's your tracker?' Sloan asked.

Leese pointed to the scarp and the thickets.

'Up there?'

'Yes.'

'With the jumbo?'

'Mm.'

He watched the plain over Leese's shoulder. Nothing moved. He told Athumani: 'Get the chains on the wheels. And do it quick.'

Leese said: 'It was a mate o' yourn.'

'Who?'

'The bloke who done my jumbo.'

Sloan said gently: 'You finish the Scotch up, Davey.'

Leese drank it. 'I ain't had a drink for three days.'

Sloan went to the Land Rover where Athumani worked with the jack. 'I'll help you,' he said. He bent. Leese was behind him. The words came with reluctance. 'I track him for close on a twelve-month, Harry. He was going well, as old as the hills, gettin' slower and slower, great big teeth he knew he'd got to drop soon in the cemetery . . . going real well on a line as straight as a poker. Twelve months I been on him. And then this bloke, this mate o' yourn, redhead, always hooting with laughter——'

'Johnny?'

'That's him.'

They had one of the chains fixed. Sloan looked up from the second of the wheels.

'Well,' Leese said, 'it ain't so remarkable. I tell him about it when I go into Mirembe for a drink an' a girl, about the teeth he's got and all that . . .' The big body shook with anger. 'He didn't waste no time, Harry. Time I'd got up here he'd knocked him off . . .'

Sloan stood. 'When was this?'

'Hour ago.' Leese pointed to the thickets again. 'I coulda killed

him. But, suddenly, I got no heart any more.' The anger had left him. Sloan saw him sink deeper into lethargy. 'I just come quietly down here. Reckon I'm finished, Harry.'

They were silent, hearing the drip of rain in foliage and the patter when water, accumulated in the cups of leaves, fell to the thickest floor, the rattle of chain in Athumani's hands. 'Yes,' Sloan said, with compassion. 'I reckon you're finished.' The dogs came from the cover of the scrub at that moment, calling. He watched them go. He did not move. These last days had been like mirrors reflecting the differing faces of insanity: Kleinert, his own, the hunting-dogs, now Leese. He wanted to escape these mirrors, desperately. The dogs went on one undeviating line for the central plain, smaller now, the calls indistinct and melancholy, a dark thread of movement lost in the flat savannas that lay between the scarp and Staedtler's Gorge. He did not move. He knew that he should follow in the truck, chained now and safe for the plain, destroy them in the open. But he did not move. He felt Leese's lost anger enter him; the faces of the Maclarens laughed with derision. They had never stopped, he knew without doubt; despite the pleas they had gone on with the poaching. The anger rose. He looked at Leese, the face vacuous in sun and the finger scratching stupidly in the big red apple-head. They could not even leave this old and failing man his harmless myth. They had to take it. They actually had to take it from him. A pair of tusks priced against a man's reason for living. The anger claimed him. To hell with the dogs. The dogs would die out there in the plain, the madness burn in sun, wash away in rain. To hell with the dogs. He went to the back of the truck for the big gun. 'I'll be back,' he told Leese.

Here, on the forested scarp, above its miniature ravine and below the rise of timber which led to the very distant settled land, he stood on and within the last of the big sanctuaries; one of the new blue patches on Freeland's map. It would not survive and the cultivated region would spread downward and the timber grow too valuable and there would be no real enforcement when the department left Mirembe. He climbed, following the natural contour of the land, through the thickets and along the trail, the grass-flattened obvious trail with its occasional bark-stripped tree, higher but the rise gentle and the sunlight scattered yellow and the sun-drawn mist coming white from the floor and thick in the nose and throat. This was the path of Leese's bull, of Maclaren, of Leese and the Chad tracker. He found the tracker above the ravine; a man as old and worn as

Leese with a high-boned Mongolian face and shoes made out of tyre-casing. 'Go back,' he told the man. He pointed down the trail. 'Stay with Mr Leese.'

He came out above the ravine, into full sun, and the ravine ran in a long cleft, white-rocked and soft in the cleft with vegetation and trees slanted from the rock at strange angles. He could not see Maclaren and he went further along the ridge and into quivers of light and shade and now the ravine concealed itself in bamboo thickets and, beyond the thickets and below where the cleft opened out into a small lush bowl, he saw the red head glint in sun.

Maclaren sat smoking; indolent on a boulder, pack open on the ground, rifle on pack, and the white of paper and the hand which did not have the cigarette going to the sandwiches. Sloan watched him, the alternate bite and the draw of smoke, the lazy exhalation. Behind him, grey, tusk-curving and collapsed in the thicket, was Leese's bull. The distance was a hundred yards and Maclaren was alone, enjoying his aloneness, his food, his cigarette; waiting, Sloan knew, for the transport which would come back from the farm, the assistance for the drawing of the tusks. He did not move or disclose himself. He was reluctant to move. The affair of Leese had come unexpectedly, disrupting a pattern. He stood now above these thickets, with this anger and this responsibility and this betrayal of Johnny Maclaren and this yellow of ivory in shadow; and he had not planned it like this. The disquiet grew. It seemed that he had been brought here. This was the true pattern and there had never been a pattern of his own choosing. He closed his eyes and the dogs ran, jaw-low, haunch-sharp and baying, across the membranes. He felt suddenly disturbed. I shouldn't be here, he told himself. *Why am I here?* He opened his eyes and he saw that Maclaren had gone to a tree-bolt to urinate and he watched, still unrevealed and shadow-dappled in cover, and the dogs ran in silhouettes of menace below the surface of outward perception. He saw Maclaren stand back from the bole, attempt to urinate over a branch which hung six feet above the ground. He's still a boy, Sloan thought; a boy doing feats in the school latrine.

Maclaren went back to the boulder, finished the cigarette. Then he took a knife from the pack, went to the thicket where the bull lay, cut off the tail and several inches of the trunk. He came back into sun, swished the tail, weighed the trunk-tip in his hand. Sloan saw him stare intently at the tip: even at that distance he could see that it dripped blood. Maclaren turned, stared at the thicket and its hump

of grey rock and the sun caught the surprise on the face and at that moment of realisation the rock moved like something uprooted and about to topple and the ivory lifted and the decapitated trunk swung and swung again, hosing blood. It moved out of the thicket, still hosing, then beyond his vision. 'The poor bastard,' he said, trembling with the reclaiming anger. 'The poor bastard.'

Maclaren stood quite still, the face comic with shock, the head tilted; listening. Then he placed the trophies by the pack, lifted the rifle, checked it and cocked it. He moved forward, around the thicket; and Sloan moved, in unison, along the ridge so that the angle of vision opened and he saw over and beyond Maclaren's own restricted vision to where the bull lay up, dark in shadow against the socketed white-yellow of the hill-bamboo. The bull did not move much; only the pendulum of the trunk with its showering of blood. Rain began and Maclaren stopped, the rifle cradled, the head tilted again and the body absolutely still, alert in the filtered sun. The rain became downpour and the light grew green and the thicket, the ravine and the wood above the ravine enclosed them in the noise of drumming rain and now the light evil and the bull black in the thicket and not even the tusks distinguishable against the bamboo and each leaf, branch and rock-face reflecting sound and the whole like a wall of sound around them and the cleft aflow with water and now this diapason of water-noise between the bull and Maclaren so that he could not hear. The bull came out slowly, black with rain and in pain from the shot and the mutilation, and Maclaren moved forward, uncertain and disoriented by this water-noise which overlay the senses, moving, pausing, moving again, pausing, listening but hearing nothing but rain-roar and the uncertainty there in the slope of the back, the leaning head, the angle of the gun, moving around the thicket and the greening light so deepened it lay on the tusks like green rust and the bull out now and aware of Maclaren and Maclaren immersed in the drumming noise and moving in it without real volition, toward the bull, toward an end which would be naturally just and a true and proper payment for all the other bulls and the lies and the perfidy and the taking from Leese, toward it, and he, Sloan, having only to watch, unacting, this poetry of natural justice, this death which was only a note in an old rhythm, having only to watch it and turn away with it finished and sound in the law he respected . . .

He killed it over Maclaren's shoulder and the rain eased in that second of the killing, then stopped; as if the detonation had destroyed it in the sky. He went down into the ravine.

He said: 'I reckon I've paid you now, Johnny.'

Maclaren nodded. 'I reckon so.'

They listened to the rain-dripping glades. Maclaren laughed but Sloan shook his head. 'This, too, was the end of something. And the laughter had never been true. 'Get your things,' he said. 'We'll get back to the road.'

Maclaren laughed nervously. 'You going to charge me, Harry?'
'Yes.'

They were silent. The pompadour of red hair had fallen on the temples and he brushed it off. Sloan saw that he was about to speak. 'And shut up about the war,' he said. 'Just shut up about it.'

After Athumani and the Chad tracker had drawn the tusks and loaded them, and after Leesc's truck had taken the Mirembe road with Athumani and Johnny Maclaren, Leese and the tracker, he went to the rear of the Land Rover and found the box with the soap and towel and the razor he had never used and the mirror with the crack across it. Then he went back to the ravine where a rill of water now ran, stripped his wet shirt and shorts and spread them on a boulder in the heat of the unclouded sun. Then he sat by the boulder, smoked his pipe and stared through the smoke at the rock and the bamboo and the shallow flow of water. It was a time for reflection, perhaps for acceptance and the stilling of protest, even for surrender to this tide of ending. It would be easy to be borne along without protest and they could never take that which he had had. It was there, of him, and it had contributed to him and it was more, much more than sunlit memories of game and quiet valleys. They could, and would, take the future, discard the things that were priceless, and there would be a race of half-men with rudimentary limbs and muscles who would never know this other life which he had had.

He picked up the mirror, stared in it. The gold threads which had enlivened it were white. There was white above the ears. He stroked his chest. The fights with Férol had taken something. The life in the plains and the forests, the living hard without concession to the body, even the lonclinesses and the wells of peace and the peaks of excitement had taken something. No man could arrest this process. He had given everything to it; his passion, his respect and his love. And it had given in return. 'God,' he said to it, to the water, the forest, the shapes of animals, the great country beyond, his eyes flooding. 'How much you've given to me.' But it had also taken.

He washed. Then he used his knife on the remaining hair of the beard, shaved with the razor. The face was that of a stranger. He

saw the imperfections he had forgotten; two scars on the line of the jaw from wounds he had received as a boy and which he had forgotten. The flesh where the beard had been was paler than the temples and the cheekbones. He put on the shirt and shorts, returned to the truck.

He did not start immediately. He glassed the plain. There was no activity except of birds and the plain would turn greener now that the rain had come to relieve it. The dogs had gone and nothing he could do could alter this day. He wanted Emma, needed Emma. He would not look further than this day and the needs of this day, or carry their love, in the mind, ahead to a consequence. He started the truck and the sky was sallow again and grey-green in the west as if it reflected sea and a long jag of lightning stood on it momentarily like a tear in its surface.

He would go to Emma.

Emma Kleinert saw this lightning. There were many children in the paddock, the paddock shared by the children of the school and of the hospital; a few blind piccans on the guide-ropes, a whirl of European and African in the centre. She saw the lightning over the white cap on Miss Smythe's head and the fork stayed on her eyes so that she saw the cap impressed with it. She said: 'I must get the children in. It'll rain again.' She went to the guide-ropes. One of the piccans had fallen and she lifted him, held the small dark body against her breast, murmuring and hearing the child's croon of response. She released him, put his fingers on the rope, but the child came to her again and she held him, whispering: 'I'm here, darling, here . . .' She straightened, listening to the cries of children, holding to the warmth of the child's shoulder and feeling this love, this pity for the blind and the innocent, like a suffusion of heat. She watched; the frantic game which encompassed the whole of the paddock, the limbs like blades in the sun. This was her world, this world of children, and she was incomplete outside it.

She picked up the child and the arms locked on her neck, went inward to the centre of the paddock and now the blades, pink and dark, flashed around her and the hands joined and she was encircled and she was at the heart of something so joyous, so imbued with the spirit of innocence, that she closed her eyes in a kind of ecstasy and there was no other love, no other satisfaction, no purity beyond the breathless ring. She began to laugh with happiness and the voices joined her, still circling, nearer now and the circle a faint gust of warmth against her skin. She put down the child and the circle

stopped, the voices gone on the pause for breath; and in that hiatus of sound she heard the call.

It came from the plain and she turned, stared across the fence to the encroaching scrub and the rim of green-brown plain. It came again, lost in the resurging of children's voices, but it stayed with her; this call which was not that of a dog. She recognised the call: there was nothing remarkable in the presence of hunting-dogs on the plain but she continued to stare and the hands of children tugged her apron and another of the dancing rings formed but she could not turn from the plain and now the scrub beyond the low wire fence flickered with brown, white and yellow shapes and the calls were loud and she could not scream, only watch them as they leapt the fence.

4

MECKIFF SAID: 'THIS IS a terrible story. Terrible.' He felt discomfited. He had come for Sloan and he had found, not Sloan, but this tragedy of the dogs. He watched them; Mrs Kleinert's stillness, the daughter—Irma or Emma—distracted and white of face, staring as if some horror leapt perpetually from the shadows of the dispensary, the lieutenant whom he remembered from the inquiry. 'I am extremely sorry,' he said. 'What can one say?' He looked at Johnson, the Inspector who had come to Port of Kuru to replace Haggard, and Johnson nodded in sympathy.

'Nothing,' Pitt said. 'There is nothing to say. Why don't you just clear off? We don't need police. We need doctors and scrum. There are three dead children, dozens with rabid wounds . . .' The voice sharpened with disgust. 'Police.'

'I have come for Sloan,' Meckiff said. 'I will ask you again. Has Sloan been here?'

Pitt turned away, put his arm around Emma Kleinert's shoulders.

'No,' Mary Kleinert said. 'He has not been here.' Then: 'It would be better if you go.'

Meckiff listened for rain. He had suffered the usual oppressive heat and this time the ache had not gone with the coming of this rain. He hoped the rain would gather, become less intermittent and, in deluge, release him from the throb. He went to the window, stared at the twilight and the silent groups of French and Africans.

'I know he will come here,' he said. He felt the weight of his own disgust. 'To do a thing like that,' he said. 'A man wrenched about and thrown away like a split paper bag . . .'

Mary Kleinert asked: 'Will he die—this man Hassan?'

'No. But it is serious——'

'Extremely serious,' Pitt said, with malice.

Meckiff turned from the window. 'I remember you,' he said. 'You were very attached to Sloan.'

'Yes.'

'And the girl here . . .'

'Yes.'

'We are all attached,' Mary Kleinert said. 'We all—love him.'

Miss Smythe came in from the ward, gave Emma Kleinert a tumbler containing sedative. She stared at Meckiff. She said coldly: 'We asked for medical aid and they have sent us—policemen.'

'You don't understand,' Meckiff said.

'We understand.'

'No, you do not fully understand.'

'It would be better if you go,' Mary Kleinert said tiredly. 'My daughter . . .'

'I am sorry for your daughter,' Meckiff said. 'I am sorry for your daughter and for those men and women out there whose children are in such danger. But there is something you do not know.' He glanced at Johnson and Johnson nodded. 'It is Sloan who is responsible for this. Sloan was sent by Major Freeland to destroy the dogs. We have come from Mirembe and we know this——'

'Well,' Mary Kleinert said. 'He did not find the dogs.'

'He found the dogs,' Meckiff persisted. 'He found them and they broke for the open plain where he could have destroyed them with ease.'

Emma Kleinert drank the sedative. Miss Smythe stroked her hair.

'How can you possibly know this?' Pitt asked. The anger mounted. 'Why don't you clear off?'

'Yes,' Mary Kleinert said. 'Leave us be.'

'He could have destroyed the dogs,' Meckiff repeated. Johnson nodded wisely. 'His own scout, a man called Athumani, reported that Sloan located the dogs, that they made for the open plain but that Sloan turned aside to . . .' he smiled sourly, using the jargon deliberately . . . 'to apprehend an ivory poacher. He made a clear decision, a choice. He let the dogs go. He arrested the man and sent him back to Mirembe with the scout. That is how I know—and it is

the truth.' He gestured at the window. 'If these men of the dam knew they would tear him to pieces.'

They were silent. The room darkened.

'I will go now,' Meckiff said. He saw Haggard's face quite clearly. An idea formed, falling into his mind like a suggestion, a plea for vengeance from Haggard's dead lips. 'But I will return—soon.'

Sloan came through the scrub and to the rear of the mission-school and along its flank and, coming from the flank in darkness, he saw the police-truck and Meckiff's negroid face turn in a wash of light and the truck reverse, then drive toward the dam. The school and the hospital and Kleinert's quarters were fully lighted and there were many people in the road and in the paddock and grouped along the wall of the hospital. There was a feel of catastrophe. It hung on the air as strong as the threat of rain. He sensed it; this and the faint presence of personal danger. He went back along the flank, entered from the rear. The Land Rover had stuck ten miles from the gorge and he had tried to winch it without success and, then, abandoning it and bringing only his rifle (which he would not leave) he had walked through the sodden plain.

Mary Kleinert was in the kitchen and he waited for her to speak. She asked, very quietly: 'Do you know what has happened?'

'No.'

'It is to do with the dogs.'

He felt fear rise.

'The dogs ran from the plain and into the paddock.'

'The dogs . . . ' he repeated.

'Harry . . . '

'What did they do?' He turned her so that she faced him. 'Tell me what they did, Mary.'

'They killed some children.' The voice was lifeless. 'Many are bitten.'

'And Emma?'

'Emma is all right. But——' He saw the face twist with pain. 'She is in there, grey like a stone. The children, Harry. She loved the children so much . . . '

'I'll go to her——'

'No. Alan is there. Leave them.'

'I must go to her——'

'Leave them. It is better like this. Better in every way.'

He stared at her. 'You've changed.'

'The police are here,' she said. She pushed his hand from her shoulder. He saw the nose quiver, the freckles move absurdly on it. 'They have come for you. The man Hassan . . .'

'I saw them,' he said. 'They drove away.'

'They will return.'

'Mary—'

'Tell me,' she said in her dead voice. 'Is it true that you are responsible?'

'Did Meckiff say that?'

'Yes.'

'Did he—tell Emma?'

'Yes.'

He felt the fear again, like an upsurge of panic. Everything was ending. Everything. What more would they want from him? He said: 'It is true. I am responsible. I could have killed the dogs.' He looked away from her. 'Oh, my God, if only I had killed them . . .'

'Go,' she said. She had turned, speaking, now, to the wall. 'Go—before the police find you.' He saw the wisps of grey hair on the neck and he went to her, kissed the nape. It had no warmth. Then he left her, walked through the house and the corridor and into the hospital.

He did not enter the ward. Looking through the glass panel of its door he saw the rows of improvised beds and the faces of children and the figures of Brooke and Miss Smythe, Zeffirelli in a yellow oilskin. They were talking and Zeffirelli made eloquent gestures with his hands and Brooke stroked his chin. Zeffirelli turned and he saw the eyes stare at his beardless face; blank, then alight with recognition. He went into the dispensary. Emma Kleinert sat, sipping from a cup. Pitt held her hand in his lap, toying with the fingers. They did not greet him.

'Emma,' he said. 'Little Ginger . . .'

They were silent.

He held out his hand. 'Emma . . .'

'Why don't you go?' Pitt asked. He seemed suddenly mature, no longer a boy. 'Haven't you caused enough trouble?'

'Emma,' he said, with entreaty. Her face was white and the shadow of fear lay on it.

'You ought to go,' Pitt said. 'The police are here.' He lost his reserve. The voice trembled. 'They are going to take you away, put you where you cannot hurt people.' He placed his arm around the girl and the two faces stared, across the gulf, and he reached

out across this gulf, touched her cheek and then her neck and he did not know the flesh. She was unreachable, beyond comfort. He went nearer to her, lifted her face. He said softly: 'Won't you speak to me?'

The cup tilted and a little of the milk spilled. He heard the squall of rain against the window, the engine of a car and the car accelerating toward the dam.

She whispered: 'You have made me—old.'

He went through the corridor and into the house and he heard the sound of feet, rapid in the corridor, and he turned with a kind of unformed prayer that it would be Emma. It was Miss Smythe. The snow-white breast rose and fell. She said breathlessly: 'They say we shouldn't run, except in emergency.'

'Is there an emergency?'

'Yes. You must go—quickly.'

'The police?'

'The men from the dam. They are coming for you.'

He stared.

'That Superintendent . . .' she said.

'Meckiff?'

'Yes. I knew what he would do. I sensed it. He went to the dam, told them that you were responsible for the dogs and the deaths of their children. He hates you—that man.' Her hand was urgent on his arm. 'Now they know you are here. Zeffirelli . . .'

'You want me to run?'

'Yes. Like the wind.'

'Don't you blame me, Miss Smythe?'

She shrugged. 'What good is blame? A man's actions . . . Who can say what will follow?' The fingers clenched. 'Please go, Mr Sloan. You are worth more than a mob.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'It is finished. Everything finished. Even Emma . . .'

'You knew that would finish.'

'But not like this.'

'Is that your gun?'

'Yes.'

She lifted the rifle, gave it to him.

'It's a good gun,' he said. 'I've had it since I was a boy of twenty.'

'Listen,' Miss Smythe said. They heard rain and, behind the rain, the noise of many trucks and the staccato of their doors, shouting men and the shouts rising into an inexpressible anger. 'Listen to

them—the second pack of animals we have had today. Soon they will bay like the wild dogs.’ She opened the door and rain came in on wind. ‘Hurry—and God bless you.’

She was breathing heavily and he heard the crackle of paper at her breast. He smiled, touched her, feeling the paper beneath the linen. ‘It’s a good letter,’ he said. ‘A wonderful letter. Don’t ever lose it.’

Then he went into darkness.

He saw them below him, in the gorge and on the lower rises of the gorge, the torches smeared yellow in the rain and even the arc-lights of the dam moving below him and exploring the cover, moving up and the light bringing greyness to the hill and the hunt moving behind and through the arcs, then the torches again, yellow where the arcs could not reach. The rain was warm and he felt it runnel in his hair. He covered the mechanism of the rifle. He could see the crescent of the dam, faintly grey above the black ravine. There was no moon and it had no beauty. He stared at it with contempt. It was like a great grey fish-bone in the throat of the ravine, choking it. He turned his back on it. The rain was good and standing here in the rain without love or money or foreseeable future was a kind of freedom. He could not see the valley or the mountains but they were there and it was a big country and he would go through the valley, above the flooding and toward the Ondes and even beyond that. It was a big country, *his* country, and he would go to it, gladly and humbly, and somewhere there would be another plain, another gorge, another valley. He opened his mouth to the rain. It tasted good and the wind smelled good. He set his face to the west.

